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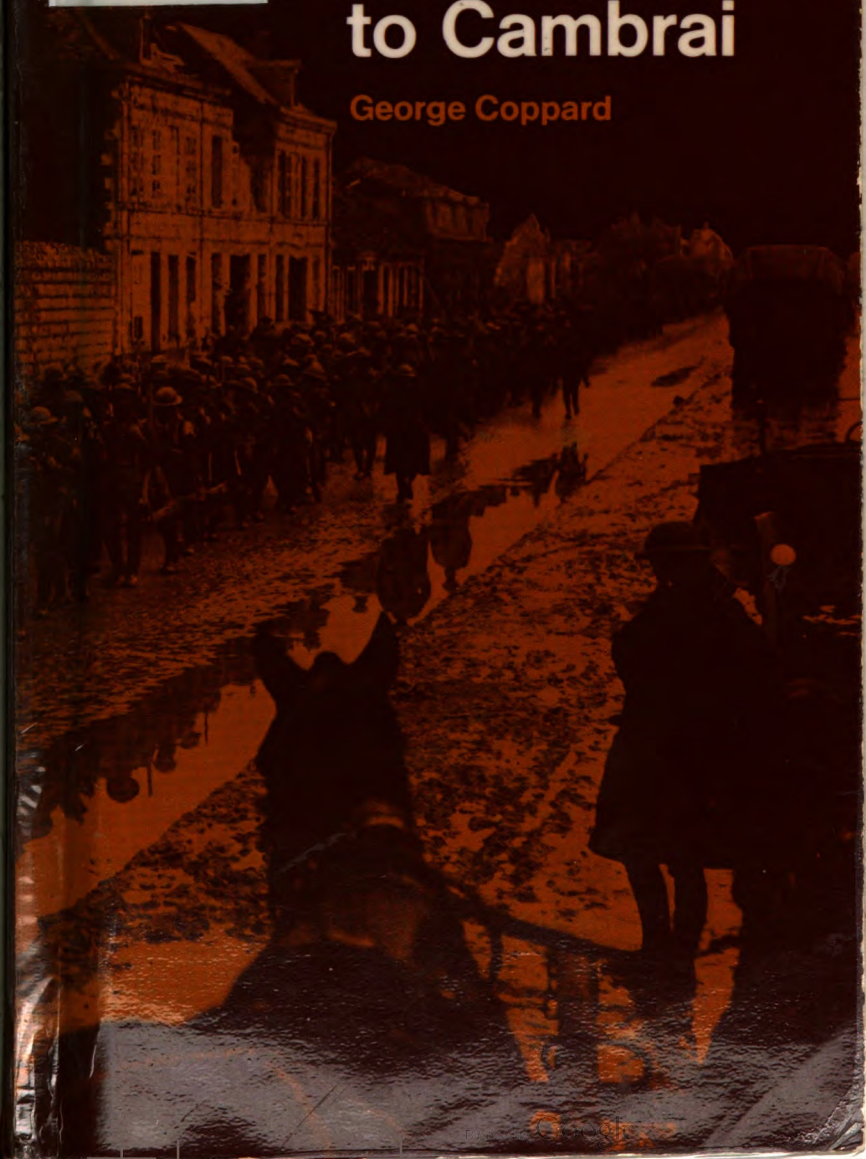


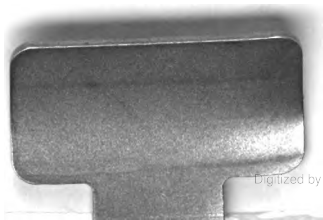
Imperial War Museum

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With a machine gun to Cambrai

George Coppard





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Imperial War Museum

With a machine gun to Cambrai

**The tale of a young Tommy
in Kitchener's army
1914-1918**

George Coppard

London

Her Majesty's Stationery Office 1969

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Foreword

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The Imperial War Museum, founded in 1917 and established by Act of Parliament in 1920, is now concerned with all aspects of the two world wars and other war-like activities in which Britain and the Commonwealth have been involved since 1914. Its object is to collect, preserve and display the greatest attainable range of objects, records and impressions which reflect the numerous facets of this vast and influential subject.

Of impressions, it may be that those of the eye-witness artist and author have the capacity to create the most immediate and the most moving appeal. It may be too that in these media, those appeals will reveal artistic and literary dividends of the highest order. The great art collection of the Imperial War Museum is evidence of the former possibility and one cannot read many pages of *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai* before recognising it as evidence of the latter possibility.

Hearing that the Museum was seeking to increase its collection of literary impressions, Mr Coppard sent me his manuscript, which he had composed on the basis of diaries he kept during the war. He kindly offered what he described as a 'plain soldier's tale' for the archives of the Imperial War Museum.

Naturally, we decided to publish the tale, for it is the product of a viewpoint enriched by a power of spontaneity which gives it a unique place in the literature of the First World War.

Noble Frankland Director
Imperial War Museum

Preface

Of the scores of military reminiscences of the First World War, almost all are the work of officers or of men, who, though serving in the ranks, by education and upbringing belonged to the officer class. Some of these accounts, such as *Goodbye to All That* and *Undertones of War*, have become classics. But though the officer, particularly the junior infantry officer, had unique opportunities to observe and comment on the war, his was a special kind of experience. He was expected to set an example to his men and was thus more likely to get killed or wounded, but he enjoyed privileges which alleviated the hardships of life at the front. He was not constantly badgered and sworn at by sergeant-majors, and he escaped the physical drudgery which fell to those at the bottom of the military hierarchy. As Frank Richards remarked in *Old Soldiers Never Die* (the only narrative of the First World War to have been written by a regular private soldier) the war as seen from the point of view of those in the ranks was a 'different war'.

With a Machine Gun to Cambrai is about this other war. Mr Coppard, who describes himself as a 'common private of the uneducated classes', went to France as a very young volunteer and served as a machine gunner until 1917, when he was badly wounded. His book is not only an extremely lively and vivid account of his experiences on the Western Front but it is also a social document of considerable importance. Mr Coppard is a sympathetic and sensitive observer, and some of his writing—for example, his description of the battlefield after the first day of the Somme—has a real emotional intensity. One feels that in his views on the war and on the manner in which it was waged Mr Coppard speaks for a whole generation of civilian Tommies.

Preface

What emerges most strikingly from his book is the helplessness of the private soldier in the face of a military system which demanded of him total and unquestioning obedience to the orders of his superiors, and which enforced those orders by severe penalties. If he was unpunctual, drunk, insolent, untidy or neglectful, he was liable to penalties ranging from fatigues to Field Punishment Number One, which involved his exposure for an hour or two each day with his hands tied to a waggon wheel. For serious offences, such as cowardice or desertion, the penalty was death. Although many of the death sentences passed by British courts martial were commuted to terms of imprisonment, on average one soldier was shot by a firing squad every week of the war. Yet, in the final analysis, it was not the threat of punishment which kept the British army in the field, nor was it patriotism, which seldom survived the first tour of duty in the trenches. The war was the supreme test of an individual's physical and mental stamina, and there were few who failed to respond to its challenge. Men endured the horrors and privations of trench warfare because their self-respect and their sense of duty would not allow them to give in. As Mr Coppard points out, this was particularly the case with the volunteer.

A certain amount of editing has been necessary, but care has been taken to preserve the flavour of the original text. The alterations have been approved by the author, who has also helped in selecting the illustrations.

Christopher Dowling

Keeper of Education and Publications
Imperial War Museum

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Page 64/Letter from the War Office refusing to discharge the author on grounds of age, 12 February 1916

The following twelve illustrations appear between pages 66 & 67

The author (seated) on convalescent leave, March 1918, with Sergeant E. Walton, a relative

British military band playing in the Grande Place, Arras, 30 April 1917

Machine gunners filling the water jacket of their Vickers gun
Albert: the Leaning Virgin, 1917

The attack on the Hohenzollern Redoubt, 13 September 1915

View of the battlefield at Thiepval, September 1916

German signpost in Tilloy, April 1917, remembered by the author

Machine gun post of the 62nd Battalion, Machine Gun Corps
Shrapnel bursting over Canadian troops in reserve trenches, 1916

Raiding party of the 9th Battalion, the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) going over the top, 11 April 1917

Advanced dressing station near Ginchy, 14 September 1916

Arrival of the leave train at Victoria

Page 113/Patrol map of the la Vacquerie sector, found by the author on a dead German

Introduction

For many years I have considered writing about my experiences in the 1914-1918 war, but although the passing years became decades and the succeeding decades totted up to half a century, a busy working life prevented me from getting down to it. During all that time I knew I possessed three battered notebooks I had carried in France, in which was recorded a good deal of what happened to me. With the coming of retirement, out came the notebooks. Reading the boyish scribble provided the key to unlock a store of memories, and I found no difficulty in reliving the excitement, drama and fears that I and my comrades shared so long ago.

My experiences in the 1939-1945 war, when I was seconded to the War Office as a special security officer and attached to the British and Allied Special Services, were fascinating, to say the least. But as a personal contribution to the war effort it was puny indeed when compared with the nerve-racking life I led as a boy in the trenches.

In the account which follows I have endeavoured to describe what happened to me, from the day I volunteered to the day I was demobbed, covering a period of four and a half years as an infantryman and machine gunner in the Queen's Royal West Surrey Regiment and the Machine Gun Corps.

I am grateful to my dear aunt, Mrs Emily Chester, who persuaded me to keep a diary of my doings in the Great War, without which I could never have written this narrative. This book is dedicated to my wife, Neilena, and our two daughters, Audrey and Sheila.

George Coppard
Tenterden, 1968



The Western Front 1915-1917

1 | I join the Queen's, 2nd of Foot

Glossing over my childhood, I merely state that in 1914 I was just an ordinary boy of elementary education and slender prospects. Rumours of war broke out and I began to be interested in the Territorials tramping the streets in their big strong boots. Although I seldom saw a newspaper, I knew about the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand at Sarajevo. News placards screamed out at every street corner, and military bands blared out their martial music in the main streets of Croydon. This was too much for me to resist, and as if drawn by a magnet, I knew I had to enlist straight away.

I had no fixed ideas of what branch of the army I wanted to join, and considered I would be lucky if I was accepted at all. Although weighing over ten stone I was very much a boy in heart and mind. Towards the end of August I presented myself to the recruiting sergeant at Mitcham Road Barracks, Croydon. There was a steady stream of men, mostly working types, queuing up to enlist. The sergeant asked me my age, and when told, replied, 'Clear off son. Come back tomorrow and see if you're nineteen, eh?' So I turned up again the next day and gave my age as nineteen. I attested in a batch of a dozen others and, holding up my right hand, swore to fight for King and Country. The sergeant winked as he gave me the King's shilling, plus one shilling and ninepence ration money for that day. I believe he also got a shilling for each man he secured as a recruit.

I see from my discharge paper that I enlisted on 27th August 1914. As I was born on 26th January 1898, it follows that I was sixteen years and seven months old. The Battle of Mons had just been fought, and what was left of the Old Contemptibles was now engaged in the famous retreat. I knew nothing about all this. Like a log flung into a giant river, I had only just started to move. Later on I was to be pushed from behind, relentlessly, without any chance of escape.

Late that afternoon, looking definitely crummy and unwashed, our motley crowd of recruits shuffled up to East Croydon station and took a train for Guildford, final destination

Stoughton Barracks. I gathered that this was the headquarters of the Royal West Surrey Regiment, otherwise known as The Queen's, 2nd of Foot. The regiment was formed in honour of Queen Catherine of Braganza, the Portuguese wife of King Charles II. The regimental badge was a lamb, which somehow seemed too mild to be a symbol for fighting men. As a young rookie expecting fireworks, something fiercer-looking would have suited me better. Old soldiers usually referred to us as the 'Mutton Lancers'.

On our arrival at Stoughton there was a rush to the canteen to spend what was left of the ration money. A roll call took place, and there were two or three absentees. I never did learn what happened. Could it be that they attested merely to get two shillings and ninepence?

Reveille was at 5.30 am next morning and, after a night on the floor with half a blanket, I didn't feel too good. Word flashed round that 'gunfire' (tea) was available at the cookhouse. A scramble followed, but there were few mugs to drink from. I drank mine from a soup plate, not an easy task at the first attempt. After a day or two of this kind of thing, I realised the simple decencies of the table I had left at home. One had to hog it or else run the risk of not getting anything at all. I learnt this lesson quicker than anything else.

Looking round at my new companions I could see that several were near-tramps. One wore a faded old morning coat and a well-bashed bowler. With his big draggled moustache he looked a perfect carbon copy of 'Old Bill' of the 'Better Hole' fame. We called him 'Uncle' and he seemed to relish the title. For about a week we were chased about on elementary drill and fatigues, with PT thrown in, and then we moved to Purfleet in Essex. Our first job was pitching a lot of bell-tents under the supervision of a batch of NCOs, some of whom were regular army and others re-enlisted men. They proceeded to treat us in the traditional manner as if we were a music-hall joke. The tent-pitching job gave them the opportunity to administer a sort of baptism of fire, and by the time the tents were up I was almost wishing I had never enlisted.

As tents were in short supply, the maximum number of recruits were allotted to each one. If I remember correctly the number was twenty-two, and not having been in a tent before, I had no idea that it had twenty-two separate pieces of canvas sewn together to form the roof. The flap was the point of entry and, with twenty-two men stampeding to get in, somebody had to get the flap division as his portion of territory. I got it. This meant that I couldn't lie down at night until everyone was in the tent. There were forty-four feet built up in tangled layers converging in the general direction of the centre pole. Nights were a nightmare to me and I dreaded them. Outside the tent flap within a yard of my head stood a urinal tub, and throughout the night boozy types would stagger and lunge towards the tent flap in order to urinate. I got showered every time and, worst of all, it became a joke. At last revulsion overcame me, and one night I suddenly went berserk and lashed out violently at someone. There followed a riotous eruption and the tent collapsed. Luckily more tents became available, and from then on I managed to avoid the entry flap.

The camp was near Purfleet rifle ranges, and a battalion of the Guards were our neighbours under canvas. They were engaged in a full musketry course, and the rattle of fire with ball ammunition went on all day long. The concentrated noise of '15 rounds rapid fire' thrilled me, never having heard anything more deadly than a 'Lewes Rouser' on bonfire nights.

During this time we recruits were still in civvies, and the conditions under which we lived didn't help matters. We looked a most untidy lot. I was wearing a straw boater when I enlisted, but it disappeared before I left Stoughton. Being hatless was tantamount to a crime, and drew scorn and dire threats from every NCO I came in contact with. I was forced to pay two shillings and sixpence per week for the loan of a begrimed khaki cap from the company cook, a cunning old South African veteran.

As if to complete the picture of utter ineptitude, dummy rifles were issued to us. However, the wheels of war industry were gathering speed, and soon issues of uniforms and equip-

ment were made almost daily. By the end of September most of us had uniforms, either khaki or navy blue. I was bucked at getting khaki, which meant that I could give the cook his hat and get out of his clutches.

Meals were cooked in field-kitchens and eaten in marquees, two sittings each meal. The orderly officer, accompanied by the orderly sergeant, would attend each meal and perform the usual ritual. The sergeant would breathe fire, smack his cane on a table and yell out, 'Orderly officer! Any complaints?' Now and then a bold type would do an *Oliver Twist* and wangle an extra spoonful of bodge. Although I was always hungry I never had enough nerve to complain. Any money I had was invariably spent on buns, pies and other odds and ends in the canteen.

It was rumoured that gunfire was laced with jalap, but I was never able to find out the truth of this. It was probably an old soldier's yarn calculated to disturb the minds of rookies like me. P T followed gunfire at 6 am, a mad half-hour of press-ups and what not. The big thing was musketry, and there is no doubt we were trained to be good riflemen. The Guards battalion finished their course and it was our turn to go on the range.

A day or two before the Guards left the camp I heard a loud cheer in our lines, and there, passing within a foot of me, was HRH the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII) in the uniform of a 2nd Lieutenant. His slim stooping figure rather surprised me. He looked very young and was carrying a paper bag, which I felt pretty sure contained cakes.

Our first shooting practice was on the miniature range with Lee Enfield .22 bore rifles. Then came the real stuff with .303 ammunition. I was a bit nervy at the prospect and wondered about the kick, but it was not so forceful as I expected. During the course I took my turn at the butts, an alarming experience at first. Quite often the bullets would strike something hard and make a fearsome howl. Once, a bullet ended its flight spinning like a top on the concrete floor beside me. Duly warned of the danger, I kept well back under the canopy during

firing. The range was close to the Thames, where the hooting of ships and river craft went on day and night.

By the end of October, with the steady arrival of recruits, the battalion strength was nearly completed. Number 701 was my regimental tag, and my official address was 13 Platoon, 'D' Company, 6th Battalion, The Queen's Royal West Surrey Regiment. We were part of the new army being formed throughout the country, Kitchener's army. The CO's name was Lieutenant-Colonel Warden, a regular army officer. 'A' Company CO and second in command of the battalion was Major Watson, also a regular. I regret that I cannot remember for certain the name of 'B' Company's CO but I think it was Captain Butler. Captain Rolls was CO of 'C' Company, and a regular army officer. My own CO was Captain Hull, a regular too. It is a pity that I cannot supply the initials of these gentlemen.

They were a most immaculate and elegant set, right out of my world of youthful experience. One of them wore a monocle occasionally, which to my mind was a staggering addition to an already god-like appearance. A curious item of their dress was the stiff white collar worn with their khaki uniforms. Junior officers wore khaki collars, but later on senior officers followed suit in favour of khaki neckwear. Maybe laundering difficulties had something to do with it.

At this time, indeed for many months to come, I was chiefly concerned with 13 Platoon, and then 'D' Company. My world never really extended beyond that bounded by company control. Company drill was a regular feature of our training but we seldom drilled as a battalion, and when we did the results were not very good. My platoon officer was Lieutenant Clarke. Somebody said that he was an Oxford don, but that meant little to me then. He was about thirty years old, and looked a distinguished and powerful man. He was sincere and kindly, with a cultured voice which I can hear in my memory to this day. From a distance I admired Captain Hull very much, but I used to wonder if he ever noticed me in the ranks at all. He was tall, slim and upright, with blond hair and cropped

moustache. Like all the company cos, he had magnificent tan riding boots and jingling spurs. In my youthful opinion he was undoubtedly the handsomest and smartest soldier in the battalion.

We recruits were always in trouble with our uniforms, which were either too big or too small. No amount of alterations by the battalion tailor produced the desired result. There must have been some pretty skimpy inspections by the War Office to pass the misfits we had to put up with. The flawless appearance of the officers multiplied our inferiority complex no end. My particular weakness at first was putting on puttees—the khaki leg bandages as used in the Indian Army—and many a choking off I got because the windings bulged a bit.

Gradually I developed a streak of obstinacy, and would show my inward rebellion by a scowling countenance or baleful glare. This behaviour was fatal and I had to pay for it. Once on line of march I glared round at the NCO in charge, an elderly re-enlisted man, when he bawled out my name for some misdemeanour or other. He gave me verbal hell, and when we dismissed he marched me off to the guardroom and charged me with dumb insolence. The next morning Captain Hull gave me four days' CB (confined to barracks) and a frigid lecture. From then on I learned to mask my feelings and took a particular interest in the art of blowing raspberries, which one of my companions was a past master at.

'Jankers' was the common name for CB, and from the moment of sentence I became liable to the whims and dictates of the police sergeant. Starting at two or three minutes after reveille and such other awkward times as could be conceived, the bugler would blast out a call which, translated into words, went: 'You can be a defaulter as long as you like, as long as you answer your name.' With other defaulters I had to run at the double to the police tent, answer my name and get told off to my fatigue. The Lord help me if I was late. It was an offence to be late, and usually meant another dose of Jankers. Emptying the urinal tubs was always the first job; you could bank on it. Other fatigues, such as peeling spuds, washing thousands

of plates and doing cookhouse chores, succeeded each other with monotonous regularity throughout the day. At night it would be washing up at the officers' mess, where a tasty morsel was sometimes proffered, or if not, pilfered, from the left-overs. I like to think I enjoyed Jankers, for it gave me the excuse to grouse, a soldier's traditional privilege. In a sense it was an important part of my army training learning how to be fly and cunning. As the youngest in the battalion I had to accept the leg-pulls of the older men, and I've no doubt this did me a lot of good.

Petty gambling began to catch on, though Heaven knows there wasn't much money about. A private earned a bob a day—three shillings and sixpence a week if he made an allowance to a dependant. On pay nights, like a lamb led to the slaughter, I allowed myself to be roped in for a plucking, hoping a miracle would happen and I'd clean up the lot. The favourite games were Brag, Pontoon, and Crown and Anchor. After an hour or so I'd be broke and become a hanger-on, a suppliant for small favours, earned by running messages for the rest of the 'school'. I'd stagger from the canteen with pints of beer and eats, and get my reward, a fag perhaps.

I must plead guilty here to a bit of unpremeditated chicanery. Paper money had just been issued for one pound and ten shillings, the design and size being very similar. One of the gambling kings gave me a ten-shilling note to buy him cigarettes, and during the noise and confusion in the packed canteen I was given change of a pound. I shot out of the canteen like a long-dog and, although my conscience worried me, I kept the excess cash just the same.

At weekends we were often given leave and free rail passes. Home to Croydon I'd go, taking full advantage of the free rides for servicemen in uniform on the London buses and trams. Towards the middle of November the battalion finished its musketry course. The weather got cold and life under canvas lost all its glamour for me.

2 | To winter quarters

On 20th November we left Purfleet for Sandling, Kent. Thick snow covered the ground. The wooden huts which were to be our winter quarters were barely finished, and carpenters were working everywhere. The cold was intense, and chills and colds spread quickly. The medical officer was under some pressure with the growing sick parades. More for the experience than anything else, I tried my hand at going sick but got MD (medicine and duty) for my pains. This was a rude awakening for me. What was it the other sick-parade merchants had got that I hadn't got? Could they put on the agony better than I could, or was it that I was just bubbling over with good health?

The bad weather continued. Life in the huts was miserable, especially as we were plagued by kit inspections every week. Our kit had to be laid out to proper pattern and order: knife, fork, spoon, razor, comb, lather brush and so on. A good deal of pinching was going on and I found myself minus some articles. Deductions from pay for the losses made me realise more than ever that I was in the army. The swiping of kit was a regular feature at Sandling, and the only thing I could do was a bit of counter-swiping.

During our stay in the huts a big fellow singled me out for bullying and foul abuse. I tried to keep out of his way, but there was no escaping the fact that I was his particular piece of meat. I got no comfort from the other chaps in the hut, for they sensed the possibility of fistic manoeuvres, an ever-welcome break in the monotonous routine of camp life. It boiled up one Sunday after church parade when I was sitting on a bench seat beside the bogey stove. In came the big fellow, who decided that I must be shifted to make room for him. He gave me a violent nudge along the seat, which deposited me on the floor. Immediately I got up he fetched me a nasty wallop beside the ear and challenged me to go outside. This could only mean a scrap, and before I had time to think it over I was unceremoniously bundled outside the hut by the boys. They made a ring, and in the centre were the two of us, the big fellow and I,

braces dangling, shirt sleeves rolled up. The Lord knows I was not a bit anxious to clash with this bloke, for to tell the truth I was in a state of funk. I can't even remember his name. Just before I was prodded into action by the crowd around us, I noticed that my antagonist was very flushed-looking. This I took to be an outward sign of his rage boiling up, but unknown to him or me, he was on the verge of an epileptic fit. When we met I struck out, and down he went kicking and foaming in fearful convulsions. He was carried into the hut and had to be held down on the bed. This was the first time I had witnessed such a seizure, and it was an alarming experience. Eventually the MO arrived, and soon an ambulance carted the poor chap off to hospital. Maybe I did him a good turn, for within a month he was discharged medically unfit. In the meantime I was in a state of remorse, waiting for the axe. To my amazement and relief the thing died down. From then on my stock definitely went up a little. Someone in the hut remarked, 'Blimey, what a wallop!' a phrase that caught on for a while.

The continued severity of the weather and the unfinished condition of the huts precipitated a move, and quite suddenly the battalion moved to Hythe and occupied billets on the sea-front. Along with five other privates, I was billeted with Sergeant Morgan of 13 Platoon. He was a giant of a man, weighing eighteen stone, but not fat. In civvy life he was a police inspector in the Port of London Authority force and he wore South African War medals. His growl was deep in his boots and he had a tiny spear-like moustache. I had a deep respect for him, for his great size awed me.

Our landlady, although very old, was a first rate cook and did all our washing and mending. Having no visitors to attend to, she looked after us as if we were her own sons. I believe she received twenty-six shillings per week for the sergeant and twenty-one shillings per week for the privates, which was good money then. Christmas Day in the billet was a day to be remembered, with lashings of good food and beer.

For the next two months the battalion, almost at full strength, engaged in hard training, which included night opera-

tions, bayonet drill and firing on the local rifle range. Fixing bayonets was a tricky business, and the sergeant instructor used to say, 'On the command "Fix", you don't fix, but on the command "Bayonets", you whips 'em out.' To the tune of *D'ye ken John Peel*, we sang the following verse:

*Now, dress by the right, boys, and get into line,
First by numbers, and then judging the time,
For you whips 'em out, and whops 'em on,
And lets 'em bide awhile,
That's the way you fix yer bayonets in the morning.*

My 17th birthday occurred on 26th January 1915, while I was at Hythe.

3 | Aldershot

We were beginning to shape like real soldiers and I began to wonder when we would go overseas. At the end of February came another move, this time as part of our training. The battalion assembled and commenced the first stage of marching to Aldershot, roughly a hundred miles, in full kit, less ammunition. The march was done in easy stages and took nine days. At East Grinstead we marched past Sir Archibald Hunter, GOC Aldershot Command. On the next day Lord Kitchener became the highlight on our journey. There was a good deal of wind-up before this event, and we were ordered to make a model salute and get the colour of Kitchener's eyes. On the command 'Eyes right', I swung my head smartly and stared searchingly into the grey eyes. I was disappointed, for they were so heavily hooded. In his greatcoat Kitchener looked very big, but so baggy and grey—nothing like the dark handsome posters of him which were displayed all over the country. Still, the event was recognised as important to us at that time. We represented some of the earliest members of Kitchener's New Army of 70

divisions. The Field Marshal lived long enough to know about the severe mauling our division, the 12th, got at Loos and the Hohenzollern Redoubt.

A little footsore, for army boots take a lot of working-in, the battalion marched on to the great parade square at South Camp, Aldershot, the Mecca of the British Army. After inspection by the CO we dismissed and poured into Barossa Barracks. These consisted of a number of old red brick blocks, barren and comfortless, or so they seemed after the Hythe billets. Red-capped military police were much in evidence, especially in the town. From the moment of our arrival we laboured under a much stiffer yoke of discipline than we had been accustomed to. Our RSM was named Annis, a re-enlisted man. He was very military-looking with his fierce black moustache and reminded me somewhat of the Kaiser himself. He drove his NCOs and they in turn drove us. Everything was done at the double from reveille to lights-out. It was all rather exciting, for although we didn't realise it we were gradually transformed into efficient infantrymen.

A lot of time and not a little of our pay was spent on acquiring the maximum degree of spit and polish. To fail in this was as good as asking for permanent Jankers. The manufacturers of 'Soldier's Friend' and 'Blanco' reaped a good harvest from the Aldershot Command.

The weeks flew by and then I was suddenly picked for a royal guard. HM King George was coming to watch the manoeuvres of several battalions of the New Army which were now working up to fighting pitch. The guard consisted of Lieutenant Clarke of 13 Platoon, two sergeants, eighteen privates and a trumpeter. Two cooks were detailed to look after the grub side. For two weeks we drilled until we reached guard-like efficiency, and I swatted up the typed instructions for the sentries to word perfection. His Majesty arrived and took up residence in the Royal Pavilion, which was guarded for one week by The Royal Scots, 1st of Foot, the senior infantry regiment. Our guard detachment, representing the next most senior regiment, took over for the second week of His Majesty's stay.

On mounting guard, two of us were posted on the main gate and four at the pavilion. I and a pal were at the main gate, and each of us had a sentry box and a strip of asphalt on which to pace up and down on the sides of the entrance. We could chat to each other across the road inside the gate. Within the hour a bowler-hatted detective tipped us off that the King and party were leaving the pavilion. I looked across to the royal mews and was amazed to see the King, dressed in khaki field marshal's uniform, mount a splendid black charger. A pale blue plume was suspended underneath its head and bits of embroidered trappings ornamented the shining harness. The entire party numbered some thirty riders and, headed by a civilian police sergeant, it began to move. I was thrilled as the King passed by, acknowledging the salute of my pal and me at the gate, followed by the Prince of Wales, Lord Kitchener, Sir Archibald Hunter, Winston Churchill and a score of other high-ranking officials. To keep us on our toes the lord-in-waiting for the day inspected the guard every morning. At night I frequently challenged shadowy figures who revealed themselves as detectives. Once or twice my itching trigger finger nearly got the better of me. Croaking frogs kicked up a row in the darkness, making things more spooky. One morning HM Queen Mary honoured us by visiting the guardroom. Accompanied by two ladies-in-waiting, she inspected our rations and appeared very interested. It was generally thought we were on officer's rations for we lived like fighting cocks that week.

A word about the canteen in South Camp. It was a large hall with a stage where low-brow variety turns did their stuff every night. At the other end, beer was sold in pint tin mugs (there were no half-pints) at tuppence a pint. The gravity was pretty good too, and a pint was as much as I could manage. There was a five-piece band, and when the beer flowed the old-time songs got going. Men really did sing in that canteen. You could hear them a mile off. On pay nights Red Caps waited outside for closing time, and it was an exciting spectacle watching the drunks trying to avoid arrest. There were few barrack rooms where gambling of some sort was not in full swing, even after

lights-out. Blankets drawn closely together underneath a table screened the contestants as they played by candle light. I remember an orderly sergeant whose job, among others, was to enforce lights-out in the barracks. When all was in darkness he'd dive under the blanketed table in our room, where a 'school' was always in session and the clink of money went on far into the night.

I became a card fiend for a while, but my luck was ruinous. Hunger made me give it up, as lack of money was depriving me of canteen suppers. I could get sausages and mash or liver and bacon for fivepence, and a chunk of bread for a halfpenny. Eating was my biggest worry at Aldershot. There was no such thing as supper supplied as part of our rations. Occasionally word would drift round that there was soup in the cook-house. Only those with no cash took advantage of the offer, and I was generally among the poor and needy. The word calories as we know it today never existed in Aldershot. The Quartermaster-General never considered the needs of a growing body engaged on hard training, trench digging or route marching. The army clerk at his desk got the same amount of rations. Borrowing half-a-crown to buy extra grub became a habit with me, for by Monday or Tuesday I never had a penny left; and pay day was not until Friday.

There was a pub in the town called the 'Crimea', and in those days it had a nasty reputation as a meeting place for prostitutes. Some of my pals frightened me with their talk of the loose women who haunted the place, and of such things as syphilis and gonorrhoea. I passed this pub one Saturday night when two women were flung out fighting and, continuing the fight across the pavement, landed in the gutter tearing each other's hair out.

Time was now running out for the battalion. Night operations, mock battles with blank cartridges, route marches in all weathers—all played their part in putting the finishing touches to our fighting fitness. How fit we really were none of us knew. For my part, I knew that my rifle was my best friend, and I had a real affection for it. As for our CO, he might have been the

Shah of Persia for all I knew of him. He had fought in the South African War and I trusted that he had the necessary experience to lead us to battle in the proper military way. We now had an adjutant, a tall handsome chap whose name, I think, was Captain Bassett. By this time the senior officers had horses, and when the battalion slogged it on route marches these gentlemen were comfortably seated.

I should say a few words about the machine gun section. Two Vickers machine guns were now allotted to the battalion. Reserve teams were required and I was picked out of the blue. This was a welcome surprise and I became a keen and willing learner. The Vickers .303 water-cooled gun was a wonderful weapon, and its successful use led to the eventual formation of the Machine Gun Corps, a formidable and highly-trained body of nearly 160,000 officers and men. Devotion to the gun became the most important thing in my life for the rest of my army career.

Rumours of our impending departure for overseas began to spread. A hair-shearing parade was ordered and every NCO and man had his hair shorn off close. I never noticed that the officers' hair was clipped with the same severity. The next thing to astonish us was an order abolishing the cleaning of buttons and other bright parts of our equipment. Every piece of brass had to be dulled like gun-metal, and bottles of acid were issued for the purpose. Whoops of joy swept through the ranks. Never was there such speed in putting an order into effect. Even the blades of our bayonets did not escape the tarnishing process, for nothing that might gleam or glint in the sunlight was exempt from the prohibition. Surely this was the most revolutionary order ever given in the British Army. The lads fairly howled with delight as 'Soldier's Friend' was flung away by the hundredweight. 'If that's how they bleedin' well want it, that's how they're bleedin' well going to get it,' remarked a wag.

I went down with an attack of tonsillitis and found myself in Connaught Hospital for a week. This was the first time I had ever been in a hospital as a patient. It was a new experience to

be in bed in the day-time and it enabled me to indulge in a little quiet thinking without barrack-room interruptions or threats. I read grim reports in the newspapers of conditions in Gallipoli and France, and wondered to what front the battalion would be sent.

Shortly after my discharge from hospital, overseas leave started, and I went with the first batch. Some barrack-room lawyer told me that all entries on a soldier's crime sheet were expunged when he went overseas. On hearing this I was tempted to overstay my leave, and reckoning that there was some doubt about my eventual survival I took three extra days. It was a stupid thing to do, but somehow I owed it to myself to do something in defiance of authority. I avoided the Red Caps, but on my return I was clapped in the guardroom forthwith. However, I was considerably relieved when I knew the battalion had not sailed without me. My punishment from the CO was seven days' Jankers, plus a nasty dressing down. Overstaying leave was worked by a lot of the lads, no doubt calculating that three extra days was well worth seven days' CB. The police sergeant had his work cut out, for there were more defaulters than work to keep them busy. Those with no work got pack drill.

Sergeant Morgan of 13 Platoon now left us, as he was too old for overseas service. His place was filled by Sergeant Fulbrook from the 2nd Battalion The Queen's, another fine-looking soldier. Any drum major would have envied his proud strut. Very soon he became 'D' Company sergeant major.

There was great activity going on in Aldershot and we soon heard that our destination was France, as part of the 37th Infantry Brigade. The other three battalions were the 6th Battalion, Royal East Kents, commonly known as The Buffs, the 6th Battalion, Royal West Kents, and the 7th Battalion, Royal East Surreys. The brigade formed part of the 12th Division, the other two brigades being the 35th and the 36th. According to an old notebook I still have, a division consisted of headquarters, 3 infantry brigades, 3 Royal Field Artillery brigades, 1 howitzer brigade, 1 heavy battery and ammunition

column, 3 field companies of Royal Engineers, 1 signal company of Royal Engineers, 1 cavalry squadron, 3 field ambulance units, and 1 divisional train. The GOC of the 12th Division was Major-General F. D. V. Wing, CB, CMG.

During the last few days before our departure for France my Uncle Alfred came to see me on his motor-bike and of course I had to have a ride on the thing, which was quite an event for a youngster in those days. I carried the memory of this with me to the trenches for reliving during the many lonely hours to come. My uncle and I were very close to each other, and he kept up a welcome correspondence throughout my sojourn in France. Later on he became well known as A. E. Coppard, the short story writer.

Came 31st May 1915 and the battalion went on the binge, as it was our last night in Aldershot. The next day we left for Folkestone. A packet-boat called the INVICTA sneaked out of the harbour at 9.45 pm with the battalion on board, destination Boulogne.

4 | Overseas

So there I was, in France at last, with one of the first divisions of Kitchener's New Army. I was very excited at being on foreign soil for the first time. We marched through Boulogne and up the long drag to St Martin's camp. I remember a long dreary wait for something to eat. On the way to the railway station next morning, French womenfolk crowded the street to watch us, and a good deal of bantering went on as we passed. A few of the boys with a smattering of the lingo at their command tried out diabolical samples as greetings, such as, 'Vous jig-a-jig avec me tonight ma chérie?' The women took it all in good part, screaming with laughter. 'Tommee! Tommee!' they shouted in excitement as they tossed biscuits and chocolate to us.

At the station the train, composed of covered freight trucks

each marked 40 Hommes 8 Chevaux, lay waiting. After we had been told off in batches of forty men there was a wild scramble to get on board, not an easy job with nearly three-quarters of a hundredweight of kit per man and forty rifles poking about. I sat on the side of the open doorway, legs dangling over the edge. The countryside looked beautiful and I felt as if I was taking part in a Sunday-school treat. The rail journey ended at St Omer, and a short march from there brought us to Eaure, where we billeted in lofts and barns. The next day the march continued to a village near Hazebrouck, a distance of 24 kilometres. Quite a number of men succumbed to the sun's heat and got a lift on a transport limber.

The fall-out rule of ten minutes each hour of marching was maintained, but after three or four hours a fall-out became more like a collapse. Men literally crashed down with a great clatter of equipment and falling rifles. Once on the ground the technique was to slacken the belt, slide forward and use the pack as a pillow. Often a man would fall asleep and reel like a drunk when trying to stand up. If his feet were blistered and bleeding, he was in a sorry state. When the whistles blew and the cry, 'Fall in!' echoed down the long prostrate column, the moans and groans would start. Like a tortoise, my home was on my back. My pockets bulged with bits and pieces. It was not easy trying to grow to manhood loaded like a pack animal.

Junior officers had things a little easier for they marched in 'light order', or with a dummy pack with little or nothing in it and a cane under their arm. Any belongings of a weighty nature were packed in their valises by their batmen and put on transport. As if to remind us of the inferiority of our station, the colonel and company COs, looking soldierly and unfatigued, rode well-groomed horses. Looking at it today it seems a display of class privilege, but fifty years ago the Tommy accepted it as the natural order of things, for the changes enjoyed by the masses now were not even thought of.

The march continued towards the trenches and, after passing through Strazeele, the battalion entered the picturesque old town of Meteren, which was close to the Belgian frontier.

The Germans had occupied it some months before, and I was greatly stirred by a dramatic story of what had happened when they were driven out. An enemy machine gun had been mounted at the top of the church tower and a large party of our troops were caught by its fire. Heavy casualties were inflicted, and thirty graves bore evidence of this in the little cemetery near the church. Rough retaliation was quickly dealt to three German gunners. A British sergeant, armed with rifle and bayonet, crept up the spiral stairs of the church tower. Bayonetting two of the crew, he wrestled with and overpowered the third, flinging him from the top of the tower. This grim and heroic tale moved us all deeply. I wondered if I would be able to strike a blow at the enemy, or if I would get knocked out before getting a chance, like the chaps in the little cemetery nearby.

We had a pay parade while in the town: 5 francs per man. A franc was worth tenpence then, and ordinary wine cost half a franc a litre. I chummed up with a country lad named Marshall, fair-haired and a year older than I was. We usually shared a litre of vin blanc, which was more than enough to make us squiffy. Some of the houses displayed notices: 'Oeufs et pommes de terre frites, 50 centimes'. With a huge slice of country bread, plus a nip of cognac in the coffee, the total cost was one franc, and we felt grown up. In the evenings we would stroll up a little street with terraced houses on both sides, and women sitting outside their doors making lace. Some of them were very old and were quaintly dressed in peasant costume. The lace took shape on cushions resting on their laps. With the aid of pins and dozens of spools of thread, which they deftly criss-crossed, the patterns developed. Each movement made a clicking sound, and in the quiet summer evening the whole street was a mass of tiny clicks. The women laughed and joked as they worked and we joined in, though not understanding what it was all about. They tried to sell us some lace but we were broke. Ypres was not far away, and now and then the sound of artillery rumbled towards us.

5 | The warning

On the evening before leaving Meteren, the battalion marched to a big field outside the town. We formed up in a square, a company on each of the sides. In the centre stood Colonel Warden, the adjutant and company c.o.s. The colonel addressed us and said that we would be going into the trenches the next day. He reminded us that we were on a war footing and that the severest military laws would apply for any dereliction of duty, such as desertion, mutiny, leaving the trenches without permission, cowardice and sleeping while on sentry duty. A conviction by court martial for any such offence would carry the death sentence. The c.o. then directed the adjutant to read out the names of nearly a score of Tommies who had recently been sentenced to death by courts martial held at Hazebrouck. I was stupified as the adjutant droned out each man's name, rank, unit and offence, followed in each case by the words, 'and the sentence was duly carried out'. The hour and date of the execution were also read out.

6 | Le Touquet trenches

Next day, Tuesday, 21st June 1915, the battalion marched to Armentières and, after handing in our packs to the Quartermaster's stores, we entered the trenches for the first time. We took over from Princess Patricia's Light Infantry Regiment of Canada, who stayed with us for instruction purposes for one day. I was glad when they finally left us, for the front line was jammed with men, leaving no space to get out of the way for a rest. The Canadians were a tough crowd and I felt a mere slip of a lad beside some of them.

The line at this part got its name from the nearest village, le Touquet, which was close to the Franco-Belgian frontier. Like everything else in life, I soon found there was a routine or system to be followed in trench warfare. If the routine was

upset by the outbreak of fighting, it was resumed when the fighting ceased. I learnt that the front-line soldier was only concerned with the matter of a hundred yards or so on either side of him. His prime interest was to know all about that piece of land stretching between his part of the trenches and the German trenches in front of him, No Man's Land. He should know the exact distance across No Man's Land, any weaknesses in the barbed wire defences and the position of any ground features, such as ditches, buildings and shell craters. Careful scrutiny by day, usually with the aid of a periscope, should provide him with a complete mental picture for use in the night hours.

For convenience, it may be said that the day really began at stand-to. Past experience had shown that the danger period for attack was at dawn and dusk, when the attacker, having the initiative, could see sufficiently to move forward and cover a good distance before being spotted. About half an hour or so before dawn and dusk the order, 'Stand to', was given and silently passed throughout the length of the battalion front. In this way, the whole Allied front line system became alerted. Sleepers were roused, and the front trenches were speedily manned ready for any move by the enemy. Sentries stood on raised fire-steps, peering over the parapet across No Man's Land, towards Jerry's lines. The rest of the lads quietly relaxed as they puffed at a pipe or fag, but no matches were used in darkness. A simple lighter which sparked off a thick corded wick into a smouldering glow was a popular substitute for matches. The origin of the unlucky third light from one match probably started in the South African War, but soldiers in all wars are superstitious and will not go out of their way to offend the gods.

An officer moves along the trench to see that everyone is in a state of readiness, and NCOs move about keeping a watchful eye on their particular section of trench. Suddenly a German machine gun, pre-set before darkness to fire on our parapet, lets rip a devilish traverse, which skims the topmost sandbags. Dirt is flung into faces and foul language seethes through every-

one's lips—the bastard. Not far off a Vickers gun returns the hate at an appreciably faster tempo as it shoots a hundred rounds or so across No Man's Land. Although there is no special cause for alarm, intermittent rifle fire develops, as if to let Jerry know we are wide awake and it's no bloody use his starting anything. Jerry responds likewise, for it is the morning hate. The whole process is rather like the early bird who starts his song in the dawn and is followed by rival songsters, the chorus gradually dying away when full daylight comes. There were not many birds near the trenches at le Touquet except an occasional owl. Just after dawn one day an owl came and perched on the wire in front of me, and I shot it, a stupid and senseless thing to do which I have always regretted. Before enlistment I had never noticed the splendour of dawn, but from the first moment of light in the east on those fine June days, I watched every minute of change with wonderment as the sun crept up behind the German lines.

When daylight came the order, 'Stand down', passed along the line. Tension slackened, but sentries still kept watch by periscope or by a small mirror clipped to the top of a bayonet. After the dangerous hours of the night—or so they seemed to me in those early days—a cautious peer over the parapet revealed pleasant country with not a great deal of war damage except near the enemy trenches. Wisps of smoke at several points showed that Jerry was making his breakfast. Things were peaceful, although a sniper's shot broke the silence occasionally. Always there was the sniper, the loneliest and deadliest combatant in trench warfare, lurking like a jackal ready to strike. It was time for breakfast and each section made its own little fire. Charcoal was the official fuel, but supplies were few and far between. Plundering for wood was a regular chore, but we never failed to produce a fire, slivering the wood with bayonets or jack-knives to reduce the smoke. Soon the pungent whiff of bacon wafted around and life seemed good when billycans were filled with a fresh brew of tea. Breakfast over, there was not long to wait before an officer appeared with details of the duties and fatigues to be performed. Weapon

cleaning and inspection, always a prime task, would soon be followed by pick and shovel work. Trench maintenance was constant, a job without an end. Owing to the weather or enemy action, trenches required repairing, deepening, widening and strengthening, while new support trenches always seemed to be wanted. The carrying of rations and supplies from the rear went on interminably.

The trenches at le Touquet were in a very good condition, in parts almost like demonstration models. About six feet in depth from the top of the parapet, they were floored with duck-boards, and were wide enough for two men to pass comfortably. A fire-step a foot or so high ran along each section of trench, enabling troops to adopt a good firing position in case of attack. The few dugouts that there were afforded very little more protection than a shell-hole. Most of them were just excavations at the bottom of a trench sufficient to crawl into and stretch out for sleep. The entrance was propped up with a bit of light timber, with sacking draped across to black out candle light. In spite of the coffinlike dimensions, four men would squeeze in and be thankful for it. For the first few nights in one of these traps I was in a funk, fearing to doze off in case the sentry dozed off too, my arm curled through the sling of my rifle, just in case. I dreaded the thought that I might be caught unawares if a swarm of Jerries rushed our trench in the darkness. There were latrines at intervals along the line, which generally took the form of small culs-de-sac cut in the back of the trench. The sites were shifted when necessary, as Jerry snipers watched them very closely for the careless. Many a poor Tommy met his end in a latrine sap.

One of the first casualties in 13 Platoon was a lad named Carroll. It was said that quite suddenly, and for no apparent reason, he stood exposed above the parapet in broad daylight, shouting and waving his arms about. What came over him to do such a thing, against all the warnings and training that we had had drummed into us? I can only imagine that some kind of mental unbalance came over him. Jerry picked him off quickly through the head.

After a few days the battalion moved out of the le Touquet sector into trenches at Ploegsteert, commonly called 'Plugstreet'. Here we had our first taste of German artillery fire. The sound of four deep booms, which seemed to come from well behind the enemy lines, was my first indication of it. In a few moments I became aware of pulsating rushing sounds, increasing in power and intensity. The threatening noise struck equally between my ears, and I knew instinctively that the shells were heading in my general direction. The final vicious swipes of the projectiles as they rushed to earth turned my stomach over with fear, which quickly vanished when four hefty explosions occurred in some ruined houses a hundred yards to the rear. This experience made me realise the value of a good pair of ears. Later on, keen eyesight and practice enabled most of us in clear weather to pick out howitzer shells in the air, thus giving us a split second's grace to decide which way to dart for cover. The German 5.9 shells weighed about a hundred pounds, and were generally referred to as 'coal-boxes' or 'Johnsons' (after Jack Johnson) owing to the black smoke they gave off when bursting. Jerry artillery had an unpleasant habit of dispatching them in fours. 'Plugstreet' was about a mile inside the Belgian frontier and there had been severe fighting there shortly before our arrival, but on the whole things were quiet for us.

7 | Armentières

On 6th July the battalion was relieved and marched to Armentières on the French side of the frontier, where we billeted in the Blue Blind Factory. Life there seemed very much like Aldershot to me, for although we had tasted trench life and suffered some casualties, we were chased about drilling and training again. At the factory gates women sold delicious-looking pastries, and it was agony continually passing them without any money in my pocket. I never did have one of those pastries, which I've always felt sad about.

Armentières had a special appeal because of the legend of 'Mademoiselle from Armentières', which was immortalised by the Old Contemptibles' song. Not long ago there was talk of erecting a statue of the famous lady to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of her reincarnation. The tune of the song was believed to be popular in the French army of 150 years ago, and the original words told of the encounter of an inn-keeper's daughter, named Mademoiselle de Bar le Duc, with two German officers. During the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, the tune was resurrected, and again in 1914 when the Old Contemptibles got to know of it.

A bathing parade was organised before we returned to the trenches, and we marched to Pont de Nieppe and bathed in the river Lys. Major Watson, the battalion second-in-command, was in charge. In the warm summer evening we sported in the water like kids without a care. The war seemed far off, yet the line was but a mile away. The major blew his whistle for 'All out' and, when dressing, someone remarked, 'Where's the sergeant?' He was tangled in the reeds at the bottom of the river ten feet down. I believe his name was Williams. A number of us dived in and searched around but the thick weeds were too baffling. Two French watermen came with a punt and carefully dragged a grappling iron across the spot where the sergeant was last seen. At last the iron caught on the bulge of an ankle and up came the poor fellow, black with mud. His face and body were lacerated by the grappling iron. Artificial respiration was given without success. I remember the major placing the inside of his gold cigarette case over the sergeant's mouth for traces of breath, but there were none.

After a rest of five days we returned to the le Touquet sector and stayed for ten days. Things were very quiet and at times life seemed almost pleasant, mainly because the weather was perfect. One early morning I was startled to hear the sound of a trumpet, followed by the cry 'Dailee Mail! Dailee Mail!' and sure enough there was a French boy of about twelve selling papers a week old. How he got as far as the front line without being turned back nobody knew. The military situation at le

Touquet was curious, for it seemed almost as if both sides, the Germans and ourselves, had tacitly agreed that this part of the line should be labelled 'Quiet', it being understood that if one side started up any bloody nonsense, then the other would follow suit. And that's how it was for days on end, except for snipers. Jerry was about a hundred and fifty yards away and behaving himself, but the usual machine gun duels at stand-to went on.

8 | The passing of Bill

Lulled by the quietness, someone would be foolish and carelessly linger with his head above the top of the parapet. Then, like a puppet whose strings have suddenly snapped, he crashes to the bottom of the trench. There is no gradual falling over, but instant collapse. A Jerry sniper with a telescopic sighted rifle, nicely positioned behind the aperture of an armoured plate, has lain patiently, for hours perhaps, watching our parapet for the slightest movement. His shot is successful and a Tommy is breathing his last, not quite lifeless, but dying. The back of the cranium is gone, and the grey brain flecked with red is splashed out. A pal of mine named Bill Bailey (his real name) died in this way.

There were four of us in a short section of trench, Bailey, Marshall, myself and another. It was early morning and stand-to was over. The fire was going nicely and the bacon was sizzling. I was sitting on the firestep and just as I was about to tuck in Bill crashed to the ground. I'll never forget the sound of that shot as it found its billet. In trenches, sounds are trapped to a certain extent and take on a special quality. Several times I noted the similarity of sound when bullets found their mark in the head. An acoustics expert could no doubt give a reason for this. A moment before, Bill had been talking to us, and now, there he was, breathing slightly, but otherwise motionless. I

rushed round the traverse and yelled, 'Pass the word along for stretcher-bearers!' We waited for them to come and for decency's sake put some bandages round Bill's head to hide the mess. Marshall and I volunteered to carry him to the first aid post, and the bearers were glad enough to let us. Bill was a big chap and it was exhausting work carrying him down the narrow twisting communication trench. The battalion doctor was in attendance at the first aid post. 'He can't last long', he said, and so we left Bill, who died later that morning. On getting back to the front line we were both ravenous with hunger. My bacon and bread was on the fire-step, but covered with dirt and pieces of Bill's brain. I looked down the front of my tunic and trousers and there were more bits there; my boots were sticky with blood.

I felt the passing of Bill acutely, as it was the first time a pal had been struck down beside me. It was a shock to realise that death could come from nowhere without actual fighting. During the ten-day spell in that quiet sector, the battalion lost two or three men every day by Jerry sniping, none surviving. A very tall captain came from divisional HQ, and he was sniped almost as soon as he arrived. Men approaching six feet or more in height began to realise they were in grave danger every minute, unless they took the utmost care and crouched low when moving about. Little chaps were at a distinct advantage so far as sniping was concerned. In fact, small men were the ideal size for trench warfare. Even when attacking, a little chap's frontage could be but two thirds that of a big fellow, but as most Tommies agreed, 'If it's got your bloody number on it, there's nothing you can do about it'. The sniper war was not all one-sided, for our own snipers were getting good results. One or two of them had been supplied with elephant guns powerful enough to pierce Jerry armoured plates.

The co was worried about the sniping fatalities, and a general strengthening of parapets took place after dark. The protective strength of a parapet depended on what sort of earth it was made of. I see from an old notebook I have kept that the penetrative powers of a .303 bullet are as follows:

clay 60 inches, earth 40 inches, loose sand 30 inches, sandbags 18 inches, oak 38 inches, dry turf 80 inches. This was just school stuff, and I don't remember my officer instructing that a parapet should be a certain thickness because of its nature. Experience was the best teacher, and our le Touquet spell taught us the value of strong and well-maintained trenches, with special attention being paid to the parapets.

On 16th July 'D' Company went into reserve trenches at le Bizet, a smashed-up little village astride the frontier. The customs post was abandoned, but an odd die-hard villager here and there remained in some of the ruined houses. Not having been abroad before, it intrigued me to be popping in and out of France and Belgium several times a day, for our section was within a few yards of the frontier. A salvo of coal-boxes landed in the village with regular frequency, usually on the hour. An old man who lived in the cellar of his battered house earned a few francs cutting hair. Needing a crop, I went to his place one afternoon, and when I shouted he came up from the cellar with surprising speed. He quickly ploughed a furrow up the back of my head with the clippers, and at that moment we heard the approach of a salvo. The old chap vanished without a word, leaving me in the chair. The shells roared overhead and exploded nearly a quarter of a mile off. After the crumping detonations died away, I yelled out, hoping to get the job finished, but the only reply was, 'Fini. Fini'. My pals heaped ridicule on me with my unfinished haircut, and it was some time before the crop was completed.

My platoon was later billeted in the barn of a fine old red-bricked farm on the outskirts of the village alongside a magnificent avenue of trees, a number of which had been struck down by enemy shells. The farm buildings were little damaged, but the owners had left. On sentry duty one night I stood in the avenue of trees, which seemed to loom up in the darkness to the sky itself. Behind a brick wall at my back the platoon was sleeping. It was chilly, and the rattle of machine gun fire from the trenches half a mile away sounded very close. Opposite me, across the avenue, I could just make out the outline of a cruci-

fix and shrine. Brilliant flashes suddenly lit the sky behind the German lines, and within a second or so came the sound of four consecutive booms from the howitzer battery which had fired. Quickly the approaching coal-boxes tuned in midway between my ears and I knew I was in for trouble. There was a shallow trench beside me, and as I flung myself into it the shells rushed to the ground, one of them striking a tree fifty feet away. The violence of the explosion and the crashing down of the top half of the tree turned my inside over and deafened me. When I stood up it was difficult to control the trembling in my knees. Brutally aroused from slumber, the platoon swarmed out of the barn to gaze at the stricken giant. Daylight came, revealing the top of the forty-foot stump spread out like a fan of huge splinters. The severed top drooped to the ground, linked to the stump by a single splinter. The crucifix opposite lay on the ground. One of its legs was smashed. Several more of those fine trees were bashed down before we left the area, for Jerry had a mania for knocking over anything that had the makings of an observation post overlooking his trench system.¹ Le Bizet church tower suffered in this way, and on one occasion a shell passed through a previous shell hole in the tower, exploding on the inside, a good example of German ballistic ability.

We went back to the trenches at le Touquet. The fine weather was still holding out, and Marshall and I soldiered along together. When the urge for arts and crafts made itself manifest, we got boyish satisfaction out of making replicas of regimental cap badges. Melting the lead content of several bullets, we poured the molten metal into a mould made by pressing a badge on the clay bottom of the trench. The new brightness of the moulded badge was something created, however trifling. Often we did our sentry duty together, sharing a tin of bully or a tasty morsel, for we were always hungry. If

¹In 1958 I passed through le Bizet on a tour from Ostende to Paris. I was amazed and delighted to find that the avenue of trees was almost restored to its former beauty. Forty-three years had passed.

either saw that the other was falling asleep standing up, a good nudge would remove the constant fear of being caught. Knocking out German observation mirrors was another exciting though dangerous pastime. We had discovered that Jerry was using big mirrors instead of periscopes. One bright evening with the sun behind our backs, we saw the movements of the Germans reflected in a mirror as they passed in front of it. The mirror was perched at an angle on top of their parados (the mound along the back of the trench) and directed towards our lines. A hit was recorded by a brilliant flash of reflected light as the mirror burst into fragments. We had several successes in this way, but our irritating tactics came to an abrupt end one evening when a sniper missed Marshall by just a few inches. Thoroughly scared by such a close shave, we packed up looking for Jerry mirrors.

Sometime in August the battalion had a disagreeable surprise sprung on it, for an order was given to resume full spit and polish of equipment. The luxury of not having to waste time and energy in senseless drudgery was to end. I don't know how high up the scale of rank the order came from. Whoever it was ignored the lessons of military history, which taught that troops should at all times be as inconspicuous as possible. Could it be that the Top Brass feared that they might lose proper control of the troops unless they reimposed the iron hand of 'Bull'? The polishing of brass gear in the trenches was the very negation of the superb camouflage of the khaki uniform. It was tantamount to deliberately discarding a natural protection. Looking at it today it seems crazy, but that's how it was and we had to grin and bear it.

Just before we left the le Touquet area, a German rifle-grenade killed RSM Annis while he was on a visit to the line. This was unfortunate indeed, for the RSM was not normally expected to leave battalion headquarters. His job was a disciplinary one when the battalion was not in the trenches, and then he came into his own. I found myself sad about his end, as I sometimes felt a certain warmth in his manner towards me. His place was taken by CSM Fulbrook of 'D' Company.

Our spells of twelve days in the front line, with breaks of four or five days' rest in Armentières, came to an end. It was near the end of September, and heavy artillery bombardments could be heard developing a few miles to the south. In a sense it was an advantage being a private for nobody told you anything. You just waited in a day-to-day kind of existence until things happened. It didn't do you any good to know that you were going to be in a great battle next Wednesday. I preferred not to have too much time to work myself into a state of wind-up.

9 | The Battle of Loos

On 29th September we left the Blue Blind Factory at Armentières, marched to Steenwerck, and entrained for Fouquereuil. Next day we slogged it to Vermelles, a war-scarred little town in the coal-mining area, close to the scene of the battle. The struggle which began five days before our arrival was working up to full fury. Salvos of coal-boxes were crashing down nearby at the foot of the Vermelles-Hulluch road. Our artillery, the howitzers at our backs, and the field guns close on both sides of us, were in full action. Their deafening thunder threatened the ear drums. It was inspiring, though uncomfortable, for soon eighteen-pounder shells were screaming just over our heads, an experience to which we were not yet accustomed from our own artillery.

Without much ado we were hustled into a communication trench and slowly moved towards the battle line. So this was real war. The other at le Touquet was just playing about by comparison. Yet our casualties there were over seventy and nearly all fatal. What is seventy compared with what is going on here, I thought. The Loos attack was a combined Franco-British effort and was meant to push a salient in the German front line. There were over 60,000 British casualties, and the battle lasted a month. At such high cost, with little or nothing

to show for it, history has come to regard the attack as a failure. Neither General Joffre, the French GOC, nor Sir John French, the British GOC, added any lustre to his reputation from the Loos struggle. Not that it made any difference to us Tommies generally, but French was near the end of his command in France. He was replaced by Sir Douglas Haig in December 1915.

Going up the communication trench at a snail's pace, the battalion suffered casualties from shrapnel fire. As many troops were coming away from the front line as were going up. Stretcher-bearers with the wounded, fatigue parties, telephone linesmen, runners and parties of relieved troops wended their way to the rear, jamming the narrow trench. The trench was parallel to the Vermelles-Hulluch road and was only a few yards from it. Bordered with tree stumps, it ran due east straight through to the village of Hulluch, which was just behind the German lines. A pall of black smoke hung over the village, which was being hammered by our guns. Wrecked war gear lay about on both sides as we edged forward, including field guns, limbers and dead horses by the score. Blown up by internal gases, their carcasses were enormous, and when punctured by shrapnel or bullets the foulest stench poisoned the air.

At last we reached the top of a slope where the German front line had been before the attack. And there, stretching for several hundred yards on the right of the road lay masses of British dead, struck down by machine gun and rifle fire. Shells from enemy field batteries had been pitching into the bodies, flinging some about into dreadful postures. Being mostly of Highland regiments, there was a fantastic display of colour from their kilts, glengarries and bonnets, and also from the bloody wounds on their bare limbs. The warm weather had darkened their faces and, shrouded as they were with the sickly odour of death, it was repulsive to be near them. Hundreds of rifles lay about, some stuck in the ground on the bayonet, as though impaled at the very moment of the soldier's death as he fell forward. In the distance, three kilometres south, and in the

midst of concentrated shell bursts, I could just discern the huge twin-tower steel structure known to the troops as 'Tower Bridge'. It stood at a pithead near the village of Loos and when captured by the British threatened the enemy as an observation post. It received a steady battering for a few days and its end was only a matter of time. One morning, when looking towards Loos, where a fierce rumpus was going on, I noticed that the thing had gone.

On the way up to the front line I carried two boxes of machine gun ammunition, each containing 250 rounds, in addition to my rifle and equipment. It was a heavy load, but the fact that I had just been posted to the machine gun section kept me going, for I was anxious to show that I could cope.

10 | The Hohenzollern Redoubt

On reaching the front line, which was under considerable shell fire, Lieutenant Clarke led 13 Platoon to the left along the front trench, passing dead and wounded Queen's men who had been knocked out within minutes of their arrival. Proceeding a short distance under heavy mortar fire, we gunners eventually took over a machine gun post in the Hohenzollern Redoubt. I can't remember the name of the regiment whose gun team we relieved, but they were off like a shot as soon as our Vickers gun was mounted in place of theirs. Who could blame them? By then, the Hohenzollern Redoubt had developed a reputation as one of the worst spots in the whole of the trench system. It was at the extreme left flank of the British attack, though fierce fighting had been going on there a considerable time before the attack began. Our general staff must have prayed that the redoubt would be captured in the early stages of the battle, and thus permit a further broadening of the salient which was to be driven through the enemy lines as far as Lens, the centre of the mining area. But the British, with some assistance from the French, failed to reach Lens. Moreover, the Germans clung tenaciously to the Hohenzollern

Redoubt on their right flank, not yielding in spite of repeated assaults against them. The territory of the redoubt, a mass of pulverised dirt, covered no more than three or four acres, yet thousands fought and died there for months on end. I don't know who gave the place the family name of the Prussian kings and emperors. Two of the trenches there, the scene of some of the bitterest fighting of the war, were called 'Big Willie' and 'Little Willie', in derisory reference to the Kaiser and his eldest son, the Crown Prince.

Le Touquet was generally considered to be a quiet front, but we soon found the Hohenzollern Redoubt to be the reverse. There was no let-up in the violence displayed by the enemy and our troops, day or night. There were times later on in the winter when temporarily at least things were quiet on a good length of the front, but never in the redoubt. The place consisted of a number of huge mine craters, roughly between the German front line and our own. In some cases the edge of one crater overlapped that of another. The redoubt was scarcely a planned military work, for it was fortuitously formed by the craters' almost fusing both front lines together, so that there was in fact a more or less constant dispute for the possession of No Man's Land. Companies of Royal Engineers, composed of specially selected British coal miners, worked in shifts around the clock digging tunnels towards the German line. When a tunnel was completed after several days of sweating labour, tons of explosive charges were stacked at the end and primed ready for firing. Careful calculations were made to ensure that the centre of the explosion would be bang under the target area. This was an underground battle against time, with both sides competing against each other to blast great holes through the earth above. With listening apparatus the rival gangs could judge each other's progress, and draw conclusions. A continual contest went on. As soon as a mine was blasted, preparations for a new tunnel were started. On at least one occasion British and German miners clashed and fought underground, when the final partition of earth between them suddenly collapsed.

On the completion of one of our mines, the troops in the danger area withdrew when zero time for detonation was imminent. If the resultant crater had to be captured, an infantry storming party would be ready to rush forward and beat Jerry to it. Some of the craters measured over a hundred feet across the top, descending funnel-wise to a depth of at least thirty feet. Several omnibuses could have been dropped into them with no trouble. At the moment of explosion the ground trembled violently in a miniature earthquake. Then, like an enormous pie crust rising up, slowly at first, the bulging mass of earth crackled in thousands of fissures as it erupted. When the vast sticky mass could no longer contain the pressure beneath, the centre burst open, and the energy released carried all before it. Hundreds of tons of earth hurled skywards to a height of three hundred feet or more, many of the lumps of great size. A state of acute alarm prevailed as the deadly weight commenced to drop, scattered over a huge radial area from the centre of the blast. There was little to choose between a German mine and one of ours. Death or injury from the falling mass was a risk to friend and foe alike. There was nowhere to run for shelter in the crater area. Troops just pinned themselves to the side of a trench, muttered a prayer of some sort, and cringed like animals about to be slaughtered.

Almost before the last lump dropped, the storming party rushed forward to capture the hot and smoking crater. The German flanks bristled with machine guns, and it was a safe bet that they would take a toll of some of our boys before they reached the crater. Those who made it literally dug in their toes to prevent themselves sliding backwards down the steep slope behind them. They lined the rim nearest the enemy, desperately prepared to die in defence of their meagre gain. It frequently happened that the capture of a crater brought the attackers less than a stone's throw from a crater strongly held by their opponents, twenty or thirty feet perhaps. A fierce bombing exchange would break out. Many of the bombs over-shot the rim of the crater and, landing on the bottom, blasted fragments up the slope. Frantic efforts were made to stack a

NOTHING is to be written on this side except the date and signature of the sender. Sentences not required may be erased. If anything else is added the post card will be destroyed.

I am quite well..

I have been admitted into hospital

*{ sick } and am going on well.
{ wounded } and hope to be discharged soon.*

I am being sent down to the base.

*I have received your { letter dated _____
telegram „ _____
parcel „ _____*

Letter follows at first opportunity.

I have received no letter from you

*{ lately.
for a long time.*

**Signature }
only. }**

Date _____

[Postage must be prepaid on any letter or post card addressed to the sender of this card.]

(25480) Wt.W3497-293 1,130m. 5/15 M.R.Co.,Ltd.

Field Postcard. Some men tried to send additional messages by deleting odd letters. [Q71268]

few sandbags at the back of our defenders to give them some protection. Both sides employed snipers at vantage points on the flanks and their deadly work added to the terror.

Because the front-line trenches and craters in the redoubt area were so close together, neither side used artillery. The casualty rate rose rapidly for the first hour after the capture of a crater as alarm spread to neighbouring craters and trenches. Inspired by mutual hate and desperation, the volume of fire from short-range weapons increased, creating an almost impossible demand for stretcher-bearers. Crater fighters were considered to have a pretty mean chance of survival, twelve hours being reckoned as the limit a survivor could stand and keep his reason. Before starting a twelve-hour shift in a crater, each man had to complete a field postcard for his next of kin, leaving the terse message 'I am quite well' undeleted. What use this was I could never understand, for many a poor Tommy was dead within the hour.

According to my dictionary the definition of the word redoubt is, 'a detached outwork or fieldwork enclosed by a parapet without flanking defences'. If this is correct, then the Hohenzollern Redoubt wasn't a redoubt at all, for there was no enclosed parapet. A better description for it would be, 'a bloody appendage to a trench sector'. Now that I have grown considerably older, with time to reflect, I still cannot understand what it was all for, but I have a strong suspicion that it was allowed to develop into a prestige cockpit of no military importance. Neither the Germans nor the British had the courage to say, 'Keep your blasted craters. You can have them. We will not waste any more lives uselessly in this way.' In spite of the bitterness of the long-drawn-out conflict, neither side secured any appreciable advantage over the other.

This, then, was the place where my fellow machine gunners and I had to spend the next eighteen days. Looking back, I realise how fortunate I was that the Number One in my gun team was acting Lance-Corporal William Hankin, a brave cool customer from the forests of Hampshire. He was very fair, with hair almost white, and his cold grey eyes did more than any-

thing else to help me control my fears. Nicknamed Snowy, he was a natural leader, and I treasure the memory of his friendship and courage. Our gun position on the fringe of the crater area had little cover, and a bit of sacking concealed the gun in the daytime. The field of fire was directed to cover any general attack on our front and, where conditions allowed, to subdue enemy attempts to capture craters. It took some time to get used to the likely possibility that the gun position was bang over the top of a German mine that might blast up at any moment. We feebly joked about flying high, but the gravity of such a trip was far from amusing. Before darkness, a muzzle attachment was fitted to the end of the gun. This was a stove-pipe extension to conceal sparks during night firing. Only the enemy directly in front of the gun would see any sparks down the mouth of the pipe. In such circumstances, any dallying on their part in endeavouring to mark the position of the gun when firing could have fatal results.

Before continuing this narrative, I think a brief description of the Vickers gun is appropriate. This weapon proved to be most successful, being highly efficient, reliable, compact and reasonably light. The tripod was the heaviest component, weighing about 50 pounds; the gun itself weighed 28 pounds without water. In good tune the rate of fire was well over 600 rounds per minute, and when the gun was firmly fixed on the tripod there was little or no movement to upset its accuracy. Being water-cooled, it could fire continuously for long periods. Heat engendered by the rapid fire soon boiled the water and caused a powerful emission of steam, which was condensed by passing it through a pliable tube into a canvas bucket of water. By this means the gun could continue to fire without a cloud of steam giving its position away to the enemy. The Vickers gun is still used in many armed forces throughout the world, and there appears to be but little change in design from the model of fifty years ago. There were normally six men in a gun team. Number One was leader and fired the gun, while Number Two controlled the entry of ammo belts into the feed-block. Number Three maintained a supply of ammo to Number Two, and

Numbers Four to Six were reserves and carriers, but all the members of a team were fully trained in handling the gun. In the trenches the Vickers was primarily used for defence, but it was also effectively used to assist an attack, by indirect or barrage fire, and to restrict and harass enemy movement behind their lines.

11 | The 'Minnie' terror

Very soon came a new terror for us in the shape of huge mortar bombs. Following a dull thud from close behind the enemy lines, we saw our first 'minnie', fired by a mortar gun Jerry called Minnenwerfer (mine-thrower). The missile was made from a steel drum, packed with high explosive and scrap iron. When fired, the thing sailed up in the air to a hundred feet or so with a lighted fuse trailing from it, describing a graceful curve as it travelled towards our lines. Which way will it go? This way or that way? There was a couple of seconds in which to decide which way to run. The Lord be with you if you misjudged and went the wrong way. At last it descended, hitting the ground with a smack. Maybe there was a moment to draw breath and tense up. The explosion was devastating and threatened to tear one apart by concussion. The devilish trail of a minnie curving towards him put fear in the heart of the bravest. Trenches were blasted into ruts. Incessant pick and shovel work was necessary to restore anything resembling a parapet or parados. Men just disappeared and no one saw them go. A weary Tommy would scratch a hole in the side of the bottom of a trench to get out of the way of trampling feet. A minnie would explode, and the earth above him would quietly subside on him. Even if the exact spot was known, what was the good of digging him out? In one stroke he was dead and buried.

In those far-off days in the redoubt, I knew that at any moment my life might be blotted out by a bullet crashing through my head, or by flying shell fragments rending me apart. In my

fear, I was permanently conscious that I was made with a brain box, heart, lungs and stomach, all available for the Almighty to decide what should be done with them.

The combined roar of minnies and of bombs exploding in the craters went on incessantly throughout our first night in the redoubt. We kept anxious watch, the Vickers loaded and ready to belt off 250 rounds. Once, a Jerry machine gun not more than eighty yards away opened fire, giving off a vivid spout of sparks. Snowy promptly silenced it, firing half a belt straight at it, and nothing more was seen or heard from it that night. Before dawn, stand-to was ordered, but we treated this as a poor sort of joke. Night-time in the redoubt then was one long stand-to. Dawn came, and we looked a haggard lot as we munched bully and biscuits, washed down with tepid water. Tea-making was out. The surest way to invite disaster was to start a fire. On the right of the Hulluch road a bombardment raged as the struggle round Loos went on. Nearby I could see a giant slag heap on the northern fringe of the redoubt, called Fosse 8, which was a few yards inside the German front line. Marshall and I were sent to battalion HQ to get rations, and on our return we learned that the team was booked for a shift in one of the craters. And so we filled in the field postcards, declaring that we were all 'quite well', and with gun and gear crept into a flanking crater. There was barely enough room for the six of us on the lip, but we found some sandbags stacked behind us. At the bottom of the crater was a pile of corpses, some British, some German. I found it hard to keep my eyes away from them. No matter where I looked I could not avoid them.

Near midnight a Verey light distress signal shot up from one of our forward craters. This called for our gun to open fire and cover the ground between Jerry's front line and foremost crater. Snowy opened fire at once, sweeping the area with a full belt. Violent bombing had broken out. Although in the darkness we could see nothing, we had laid the Vickers on the enemy parapet at dusk, which ensured effective fire in the right quarter. For good measure Snowy ripped off a second belt, trimming the enemy parapet nearest the craters. Shortly after, we were re-

lieved to see the all-clear signal go up. We later heard that a Jerry attack had been beaten off after fierce hand-to-hand fighting. Moreover, through his prompt action, Snowy had knocked out a number of enemy reinforcements. Striking a blow at Jerry was a badly-needed tonic for our little unit. We had taken a lot of muck and had not been able to retaliate, owing to lack of a direct target. This enforced inactivity increased our fears, but when a call for aid came and the Vickers lashed out in answer our fears lessened and courage began to glow. Jerry was jumpy for the rest of that night, and kept bombing and firing rifle-grenades. The Queen's, who held four craters, replied with bomb for bomb. With occasional rips of machine gun fire, accompanied by the roar of minnies dropping on our front line and support trenches, the dread sound of war was maintained. The Germans seldom used minnies against our craters, which were too close to their own.

It was an immense relief to get out of the crater at the end of our shift. We had been lucky. Because our position was on a flank, any rifle-grenades which had come our way had overshot to the back of the crater. In a sense being relieved was going from the frying pan into the fire, for we were back in the minnie area again. In twelve hours another spell of crater duty awaited us. In the meantime, miners worked furiously digging their tunnels. Fatigue parties sweated as they dragged out masses of excavated earth and scattered it far and wide after dark. Our mortar men did their best to counter the dreaded minnies, but their efforts were feeble by comparison, as the bombs used only weighed about 60 pounds. 'Toffee Apples' we called them. The stick part was a rod of metal an inch or more thick stuck in the barrel of the mortar gun, with the apple, which was as big as a football, protruding. When fired, it sailed head over heels towards Jerry but, strangely, the stick very often came flying back, and caused quite a few casualties. It was not until a year later, with the appearance of the Stokes mortar gun, that our mortar gunners beat Jerry to the punch. A good crew on this revolutionary weapon could get nine bombs in the air before the first one struck the ground.

The days passed, and on 5th October came the depressing news that our divisional commander, Major-General Wing, had been killed at the foot of the Hulluch road near Vermelles. The general was on horseback with his escort of two lancers, when a coal-box struck in their midst. I knew little about generals then, but I was sorry that our leader should be killed in this way. To us in the Hohenzollern Redoubt, the loss was a real and disturbing thing. Several years after the war a cigarette firm issued a series of cigarette cards, depicting the badges of army divisions in the Great War. The card for the 12th Division showed the ace of spades, and the short history stated that . . . 'the division earned the unusual and melancholy distinction of losing its commander, Major-General F. D. V. Wing, CB CMG killed in action'. I presume that the quotation given was supplied by the War Office. Survivors of the 12th Division might be forgiven for hoping and trusting that there are other official distinctions recorded on the division's record of battle, less unusual and melancholy than that of losing its general. At least it indicated that few divisions lost their commanders, mainly I suppose because of the static kind of warfare. By comparison, during the Battle of Borodino in 1812, twenty-two Russian and eighteen French generals were killed. In the Second World War it was not uncommon for generals to be killed or captured. The command of the 12th Division was taken over by Major-General A. B. Scott, CB.

Prolonged exposure to siege warfare conditions of the type which prevailed in the Hohenzollern Redoubt seriously affected the morale and nervous systems of men not physically capable of endurance. If any poor devil's nerves got the better of him, and he was found wandering behind the lines, a not infrequent occurrence, it was *prima facie* a cowardice or desertion case. There was no psychiatric defence available to help save him from a firing squad. The RAMC knew little about mental distress brought on by the violence of war, or if they did, little was done about it. They recognised a shell-shock case, when a man loses control of his limbs, but what of the man who, although not a raving lunatic, loses control of his will? Psy-

chiatry as a profession was unknown or else not officially recognised then. It is my considered opinion that some men who met their end before a firing squad would have willingly fought the enemy in hand-to-hand combat, but they simply could not endure prolonged shell and mortar fire.

There was a scarcity of water in the redoubt, and shaving was not permitted for a period. Those with vigorous hirsute growth looked like cavemen. An intriguing rumour was afoot that the RSM was in trouble for shaving, but I never heard that he was put on a charge for disobeying an order. A shave lasted me ten days then, but Lamport of 13 Platoon, a big ginger chap, had a beard an army razor wouldn't touch. He led a hell of a life because of it. Sharing out the rations for a small unit was a bit of a lottery, especially where tins of jam, bully beef, pork and beans, butter and so on were concerned. The share-out was seldom favourable to a six-man team. So far as I know there were no hard and fast rules regarding the quantity of each type of ration a man was entitled to. The Army Service Corps were the main distributors, but how much food actually arrived in the trenches depended on such things as transport, the weather and enemy action. Irregular appropriations were likely to be made *en route*. When casualties occurred the share-out was bigger, but only for a day or two. A bread ration was seldom seen in the redoubt. Hard biscuits must have been torture for men with false teeth, who had to soak them in water. Wrapping loose rations such as tea, cheese and meat was not considered necessary, all being tipped into a sandbag, a ghastly mix-up resulting. In wet weather their condition was unbelievable, and you could bet that the rats would get at them first. Maconochie, a 'dinner in a tin', was my favourite, and I could polish one off with gusto, but the usual share-out was one tin for four men. Tinned jam was an important part of our diet, and in the early days always seemed to be plum and apple, made by a firm named Tickler. It was not popular, and a derisory ditty went like this:

*Tickler's jam, Tickler's jam,
How I love old Tickler's jam,
Plum and apple in a one pound pot,
Sent from Blighty in a ten ton lot.
Every night when I'm asleep,
I'm dreaming that I am,
Forcing my way through the Dardanelles,
With a ton of Tickler's jam.*

Soldiers' jam took on a new look when Australia supplied such varieties as Quince Conserve, Melon and Honey, and Pine-apple. I do not recollect ever receiving an apple or an orange as part of my rations in France.

12 | 'Chatting'

On 18th October the battalion was relieved and trudged back to Verquin, a village near Béthune. We were done up and severely shocked by our experiences. That they were just the beginning of a long unknown period full of such happenings was a certainty. A full day's rest allowed us to clean up a bit, and to launch a full scale attack on lice. I sat in a quiet corner of a barn for two hours delousing myself as best I could. We were all at it, for none of us escaped their vile attentions. The things lay in the seams of trousers, in the deep furrows of long thick woolly pants, and seemed impregnable in their deep entrenchments. A lighted candle applied where they were thickest made them pop like Chinese crackers. After a session of this, my face would be covered with small blood spots from extra big fellows which had popped too vigorously. My pals would look the same, as if some dreadful contagion had suddenly assailed them. In parcels from home it was usual to receive a tin of supposedly death-dealing powder or pomade, but the lice thrived on the stuff. Lice hunting was called 'chatting'. If a chap said he was going for a 'chat', we knew what he meant. The word sounds as if it originated in the Indian Army.

The battalion cooks got busy with the field-kitchens, and life began to glow in us with the sweet smell of bacon frying. A familiar cry I loved to hear was, 'Roll up for your dip!' This was the hot swimming bacon fat in which one could dip a slice of bread. Experience told me to drop everything and run like hell to get in quick. Sometimes the cooks poured an extra tin of condensed milk into the big dixies of tea. The toffee-like brew seemed delicious to my young palate. Bully beef stew, too, tasted jolly good when one hadn't had a hot meal for three weeks.

Three or four of us went to Béthune one evening. The estaminets were full of soldiery and were doing a roaring trade. Snowy and I got primed on *vin blanc*, and started to look for a place where rumour had it that certain ladies were available for two francs. The rumour was either false, or we were too stupid to find the place.

At a post parade I was happy to receive a wrist watch from a dear aunt and uncle of mine. It was the first watch I had ever owned. I regularly got a hundred cigarettes a month from my Uncle Alfred. He knew I had become a confirmed smoker. Cigarettes were as important as ammunition. A Tommy would ask for a fag when near death, as if it was some kind of opiate that relieved pain and smoothed the path to oblivion. I've no doubt at all that it did. A shortage of cigarettes was sheer agony, and I once tried smoking dried tea leaves rolled in brown paper. It was pretty horrible. Weekly rations usually included twenty, perhaps thirty, cigarettes per man but most Tommies relied on parcels from home for their main supplies. Relatives and friends must have made considerable sacrifices to do this for their loved ones. A funny character in 13 Platoon, Bill Collins, always rolled his own with a pungent dark shag, and used his cap as a cigarette case. His first fag-end after stand-down in the early mornings had a rich aroma like a cigar. It was a treat to see the satisfaction he got from it. Once he gave me a couple of puffs and my head reeled.

October 26th came and we returned to Vermelles. The Battle of Loos had petered out, but the noise of bombing in the

redoubt area renewed the sensation of fear in the pit of my stomach. The Guards Division was in the neighbourhood, and HRH the Prince of Wales was seen by some of the lads. For the first time I noticed members of the newly-formed Welsh Guards Regiment.

13 | Fosse 8

We went up to the front line again, a little to the left of the redoubt. The dominating feature here was Fosse 8, a vast black heap of coal waste about eighty to a hundred feet high, and, if my memory serves me, well over a hundred yards long. The two front lines were very close, less than a hundred yards apart, and with the big Fosse looming up directly in front of us, we felt naked and wide open to enemy observation. The great black monster was a puzzle, yet only once did we catch a Jerry on it. Leaving it too late after first light, his silhouette was sharp and clear on the skyline, and that was the end of him. By the accuracy of his mortars and rifle-grenades, which were fired from the back of the Fosse, it was certain that the enemy kept observation on us from the black mass which seemed to tower over us. The sniping too was deadly. Sometimes our artillery bashed at the great lump, churning up huge clouds of black dust, and Jerry would lie doggo for a while. On humid days we could discern faint eddies of smoke puffing forward from machine guns firing from the bowels of the Fosse, no doubt dug in and camouflaged in some way. Screened behind a bit of sacking, Snowy would pump a long burst at the spot, the bullets tearing into the slag, ricochetting violently. This happened several times in damp conditions, and Snowy's riposte was usually followed by Jerry rifle-grenades dropping dangerously close to our position. One nearly put paid to Snowy and me. We saw the thing a moment before it struck in front of the Vickers, and ducked. The gun was knocked over and two holes were pierced in the water jacket.

Temporary repairs were made with moulding clay from the gun's first aid kit, and a neat patch was put over the holes by the battalion armourer later on.

As we were on the fringe of the redoubt, the minnie threat extended to our area, and many dead were churned up in bits and pieces. Every square yard of ground seemed to be layered with corpses at varying depths, producing a sickening stench. We would curtain off protruding parts with a sandbag, pinned to the side of the trench with cartridges. A swollen right arm with a German eagle tattooed on it used to stick out and brush us as we squeezed by, and once a head appeared which wasn't there an hour before. When attempted concealment was useless, we'd chop off the putrid appendages and bury them. So long as we were alive, we had to go on living, but it wasn't easy with the dead sandwiched so close to us. We took our meals and tried to sleep with them as our neighbours. Amid laughter and bawdy stories they were there.

In keeping with this almost sub-human way of life went the foul language which we used in nearly every sentence. I'm sure that half the time we didn't know we were swearing. It just came naturally, as if it was the proper way to talk. I often think that this bad habit was an unconscious protective shield to keep us from becoming crazy. To us, everybody in authority was a bastard of some kind, and the RSM, a decent bloke really, was the subject of many vain boasts to do him in at the first horrible opportunity. The enemy were bloody bastards always. The supreme odium was to refer to someone as a windy bastard, which was, of course, just being bloody nasty, for without doubt we were all windy at some time or other, a few no doubt more windy than others. It must be acknowledged that in most of the situations that Tommies had to contend with, bad language was the only kind that made sense. The adjective derived from the four letter word held pride of place in our limited vocabulary. 'Pass me that —— pozzy' (jam) was considered proper English. A pent-up bloke felt good after delivering a particularly foul and original sentence, and his face would beam at the cheers which acclaimed his efforts.

Rats, too, were a powerful contributory cause of some of the language used. They bred by the tens of thousands and lived on the fat of the land. When we were sleeping in funk holes the things ran over us, played about, copulated and fouled our scraps of food, their young squeaking incessantly. There was no proper system of waste disposal in trench life. Empty tins of all kinds were flung away over the top on both sides of the trench. Teeming millions of tins were thus available for all the rats in France and Belgium in hundreds of miles of trenches. During brief moments of quiet at night, one could hear a continuous rattle of tins moving against each other. The rats were turning them over. What happened to the rats under heavy shell-fire was a mystery, but their powers of survival kept pace with each new weapon, including poison gas. One night, with a big moon rising behind Jerry's line, I put a piece of cheese on the parapet, a black mountain against the moon's face. I cocked a revolver close to the bait and stood motionless. Rat after rat came in quick succession, took one sniff and died. At one time a sandbag full of peas hung from the vaulted roof in Vermelles brewery, a safe enough place we thought. When all were asleep, a rat stood on a man's head and tore at the bag. Suddenly a cascade of peas showered on the sleeper's face, and he woke up shouting and striking out in his alarm. Pandemonium and foul language spread through the vaults.

After twelve days in the Fosse 8 area, the battalion was relieved and marched to the village of Sailly-Labourse. The usual cleaning up and 'chatting' preceded a bath, surely the funniest of a lifetime. Steam had been raised at the pit head of a coal mine. In a shed stood a number of huge vats about six feet high and eight across, each holding several hundred gallons of hot water of a murky hue. A short ladder leaned against each vat. The entire place was covered in coal dust and grime, and there was little room in which to move. We cared not a bit, and in we plunged. It was a riot. The noise rivalled a madhouse. An old French boiler-man in attendance never even smiled, probably thinking of the mess he would have to clear up later. The big laugh came when drying ourselves. Every-

body had a black behind. At the finish we were as black as our divisional badge.

When in reserve, it was normal routine in the machine gun section to give guns, accessories and equipment a complete overhaul. Most of us were dedicated enthusiasts, and strove to maintain the weapons at peak efficiency. Gun barrels had an average life of 18,000 rounds of firing, after which accuracy fell off. A spare barrel was carried for replacement when necessary.

At Sailly I was put on guard duty. It was early November and the nights were dark and cold. Flashes of light from the Hohenzollern Redoubt five kilometres east lit the sky. I could hear the deep roar of minnie bursts as I paced up and down outside a row of miners' cottages in which my companions were sleeping. At first light in the morning a party of a dozen men approached my post, and turned off into the Annequin Road, where there was a disused coal mine. Later on I heard a volley of shots. On that day a rumour went round that two Tommies had been executed that morning. Rumours of that kind were generally based on fact. Somebody always got to know. Executions became the subject of much earnest conversation, especially when a list of names was published. Personally, I was horrified at this terrible military law, and I was scared stiff that one day I would be picked for a firing squad. Would I be able to shoot straight at another Tommy? To be honest, I don't think I would have refused. The code of slavish obedience to orders given, no matter what, was as strong in me as in all volunteers then. That was the important thing about the volunteer system fifty years ago. A man was challenged, not compelled, to fight for his country and all that it entailed. A volunteer seldom failed to meet the challenge because of an inborn pride at being a volunteer. It worked that way.

Our six days' rest passed like a flash, and in no time we were back in front of Fosse 8. From the comparative seclusion of Sailly, we were pitched within a couple of hours into some kind of Dante's inferno again. A quick dispatch to kingdom come hovered in the air for those with ill-fated regimental

numbers. My diary says, 'Heavy shelling and mortars here. Very cold.' Winter clothing had not been issued and the nights were bitter. I was now Number Two in the gun team, Snowy being Number One. He kept the spare lock—a vital reciprocating part of the mechanism—in his trouser pocket for warmth, as the cold stiffened the oil on moving parts. Every half hour he whipped out the lock in the gun and substituted the warm one from his pocket.

When I was with Snowy I always felt confident. He set for me a standard of cool behaviour that I tried to imitate and profit by. In a machine gun sense he was an expert in his understanding of the idiosyncracies of the Vickers, and in his marksmanship. Wielding an axe in his forester's job had developed a powerful pair of hands and forearms. He loved to exert his strength, especially on me. Without warning he'd grip my hand and squeeze. 'Handgrips with the Brandenburger' he called this manoeuvre, forcing me to yelp. He knew his Conan Doyle and H. G. Wells, and that made him a well-read man so far as I was concerned. Reciting heroic poetry was another of his likeable habits, and to this day I can remember a good deal of 'King Robert of Sicily', which he declaimed in grand theatrical style, gestures and all. Many a time on watch together, and Jerry barely a hundred yards off, I'd say, 'What about a bit of King Robert, Snowy?' And he would oblige.

Only a strong man could be Number One. He carried the tripod, the heaviest item of equipment. At that time, each of us carried a rifle and 120 rounds of personal ammunition as well, and when moving under our loads the rifles seriously hampered our passage in the narrow trenches. This was put right later when the Machine Gun Corps was formed, and revolvers were issued.

Our relief came at the end of a ten-day spell in front of Fosse 8, but we left one of the team behind. A minnie blast buried him, and although we dug him out quickly, his neck was broken. Tramping back to Vermelles down a communication trench called 'Wing's Way', after our late commander, we were a quiet lot. That night we slept in the brewery vaults,

and felt safe enough to enjoy a good night's rest. The next morning as we stood ready to march off to Sailly, a coal-box plunged into the brewery ruins and killed a sergeant as he emerged from the vaults. There was not a scratch on him. Concussion had done it. We spent a few days at Sailly, and on 22nd November the battalion marched via Béthune to a hamlet near Lillers called Ecquedecque, a total of 20 kilometres. Each step we took was in the right direction, away from the war area. And as we marched our spirits soared, in spite of our 80-pound load. The senior officers, as befitting their station, sat astride well-groomed horses. The troops marching immediately behind the horses kept a wary eye on their hind-quarters. Any sign of tail elevation was quickly noted and evasive action was taken when necessary, accompanied by mock cries of alarm. Occasionally the riders would dismount to stretch their legs. Immaculate as always, with spurs a-jingling, 'D' Company CO, Captain Hull, would scrutinise the ranks and pick on somebody with a button unfastened on his tunic, or similar trifle. This would be the signal for the CSM and sergeants to get all pepped up and start yelling commands. 'That man there!' 'Put yer hat straight!' 'Pick 'em up, left right, left right!' There was no visible reaction against all this, but every Tommy said 'bastards' under his breath, I'll wager.

Along the straight cobbled roads we marched. The tree-lined sides stretched ahead, the perspective drawing them together in a never-changing V for a couple of kilometres or so. There would be a slight change of direction and straight ahead another taunting V. As the distance increased, so likewise did the weight of our packs, and the more cruel the cobble stones became to our feet. Although it was late in the year, it was good to see the clean hedgeless countryside, now clear of the harvest. We passed many farms where threshing was in progress. I remember seeing a handsome Percheron horse penned in a sloping escalator affair, using his great strength and weight to turn the wheels of the threshing machine. It was a strange and fascinating sight to see as we slogged along. In the

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villages big dogs were pulling small carts, and one was in a treadwheel, walking fast but getting nowhere. Everything was peaceful, as the peasants went about their work in the age-old way.

To the sound of mouth-organs playing, the marching column would break into song, each platoon or company singing a different tune perhaps. *Colonel Bogey* was second only to lowbrow rhymes about the war, sung to well-known hymn tunes with words varied to taste. One rhyme about the Army Service Corps (sometimes referred to as 'Alley Sloper's Cavalry') was sung to the hymn tune *The Church's One Foundation*, and went as follows:

*We are King George's army,
We are the ASC
We cannot fight, we cannot march,
What —— good are we?
But when we get to Berlin,
The Kaiser, he will say,
'Hoch, Hoch! Mein Gott,
What a bloody fine lot
Are the boys of the ASC! '*

A special favourite of mine when marching was a kind of recitative. Suddenly, during a lull in the singing, a solitary declamation from somewhere in the ranks would begin the thing in mock dramatic style:

Recitative: *Today's my daughter's wedding day,
Ten thousand pounds I'll give away.*
Chorus (with gusto): *Hooray! Hooray!*
Recitative: *On second thoughts, I think it best
I'll store it in the old oak chest.*
Chorus (with jeers): *You stingy old bastard!
You dirty old bleeder!*

All within earshot joined in the chorus, the last line being

delivered with professional clarity and venom. I had a warm regard, too, for the humour of the following:

*Far, far from Ypres I long to be,
Where German snipers can't pot at me.
Deep in my dugout, where the worms creep,
Waiting for sergeant to sing me to sleep.*

The battalion stayed in Ecquedecque for fourteen days, during which time the machine gun section had special intensified training. There were now four Vickers guns to be manned, and plans were afoot to amalgamate with the other three machine gun sections in the 37th Brigade. When joined together, the sixteen guns would form the armament of the 37th Machine Gun Company of the Machine Gun Corps. Similar amalgamations would be taking place throughout the overseas army forces, while in England new machine gun companies would be formed and attached ready-made to new divisions.

14 | Givenchy

On 6th December we marched back to Béthune and stopped one night in an empty tobacco factory. Next day we took over a trench sector in the Givenchy area, five kilometres north west of the Hohenzollern Redoubt. The trenches were full of liquid mud, which reached up to our knees. With the absence of proper dugouts and no dry place to sleep, we were soon in a wretched state. It rained cats and dogs, and the nights were pitch dark and bitterly cold. On gun duty the hours dragged by with excruciating tedium and hunger. My thoughts would drift to a spot where a punctured tin of condensed milk was poked in a cavity, and I would speculate on the risks involved in filching a swig without my companions knowing. Being young I was ravenous for sweetness.

The Givenchy sector had all the elements of a most unpleas-

ant spell: Prussian troops facing us across No Man's Land, minnies and water-logged trenches. The Prussians—I find it strange to think of them as East Germans today—no doubt regarded themselves as the crack German infantry, with some justification perhaps, for they were the most belligerent of all the Jerry infantry. Saxons, by contrast, were the quietest, and wouldn't go out of their way to foment any strafing. Did the Prussians know that we were fresh troops in that area, and decide to give us a bit of a reception? For two days they kept up a torment of minnies and rifle-grenades. At first light on the third day, Snowy and I saw a sheet of white material stretched taut, and well in front of the enemy wire, on which was painted, 'Onwards to Paris'. To register suitable defiance and disdain of the Prussian boast, Snowy raked the sheet with a full belt, blasting the message and carving the material to ribbons. This affront aroused the ire of the Prussians, and over came the minnies with a vengeance. Stand-to was on, and sporadic rifle fire by both sides soon reached fusillade proportions. But it was nothing more than a fierce morning hate, and after ten minutes it died down.

Bust-ups with the Prussians would start on the slightest pretext, and although a lot of ammunition may have been wasted, it was good for morale and made the noise of war. It did one good to have a bang in Jerry's direction, if only with a rifle. We knew he was just across No Man's Land in large numbers—his volume of rifle fire told us that—and he had to be kept there. Except when in the craters, one might not see a single Jerry for days on end. Fierce exchanges of fire caused casualties, chiefly by minnies. A direct hit on a short section of trench wiped out everybody in it. Bullets skimming the top of the parapet took on lightning changes of direction after they had ricocheted. In a crowded trench it was not uncommon for two or even three men to be hit by a ricochet. Jarvis was shot clean through the neck by a ricochet when standing close beside me. He bled severely, and when carted off we felt sure he was a goner, but, far from pegging out, he never got beyond the base hospital. The bullet had passed through his neck

without rending a vital part and, the wound quickly healing, he was back in the front line in a few weeks. This was tough luck really, as he deserved a spell in Blighty.

Some men seemed to get wounded as soon as they arrived in the front line. One Tommy I knew had three separate wounds all received in the front line, and his total service in the trenches was but ten days in all. He got his third wound when mounting a ladder to go over the top in an attack. He slipped backwards and was impaled on the bayonet of the Tommy behind him, causing a deep and ugly gash, which got him to Blighty. The prospect of getting a 'Blighty one' was the fond hope of most men, but wishful thinking in this connexion usually excluded maiming by lumps of shrapnel. Bullets only were allowed.

Our gun team moved a short distance away to Marie Redoubt, a non-crater affair attached to the front trench. An artillery observation officer came close to our gun position and, linked by telephone to his eighteen-pounder battery in the rear, proceeded to give fire directions. The battery opened fire and shells screamed just over the top of us, crashing into some brickwork inside Jerry's front line. Sixty or seventy shells were fired, after which the officer packed up and cleared off to the rear. As expected, we hadn't long to wait for enemy retaliation by whizz-bangs, and several of the Queen's were killed and wounded by direct hits on our trench. This kind of thing happened frequently. At a Tommy's level some of our artillery shooting seemed crazy, maybe because we didn't appreciate the significance of the target, but more probably because we feared we would get the dirty end of the stick, as we invariably did.

One rainy night it fell to me to draw the team's rations from battalion HQ at Cuinchy. We cut the cards for the job, and I drew the ace, which was low. I wandered about in the darkness without a clue as to my whereabouts. Suddenly I saw a faint light in a ruined building, and a savoury odour wafted towards me. Investigating further, I found to my delight that I had stumbled across a kind of soup kitchen. The Tommy in charge

was stirring a copperful of 'Shackels', (soup made from the very dregs of army cooking) with a big stick. The warmth and zest from that washy liquid, unexpected as it was, compelled me to have a second bowlful, which I drank with the same enthusiasm as the first. On getting back with the rations, I upset my pals a little in bragging about the soup. The next time rations had to be fetched everybody volunteered to go. The name Cuinchy reminds me that Captain Robert Graves in his book *Goodbye to All That* mentions that on his return from Cuinchy he partook of a special dinner. It consisted of fish, new potatoes, green peas, asparagus, mutton chops and strawberries and cream, washed down with three bottles of Pommard. Still, I doubt whether he enjoyed the meal more than I did the soup on that cold wet night.

At Givenchy I had my first issue of rum. It was not enough to get me mad and make me want to take on the whole German Army, but it was jolly welcome for all that. It must have been proof spirit for its fire nearly choked me. It was generally thought that the Jocks were more favourably treated in rum issues than the English. I'm sure there was something in this, especially when the Jocks were going to attack. Rum issues to our gun team were a hit or miss affair. Being a small unit, more often than not we were overlooked. Senior NCOs knocked it back all right, drinking far more than their ration. The song about rum wasn't cooked up for nothing. To the tune of *Though your heart may ache awhile, never mind* one verse went:

*If the sergeant drinks your rum,
Never mind!
And your face has lost its smile,
Never mind!
He's entitled to a tot,
But not the bleedin' lot,
If the sergeant drinks your rum,
Never mind!*

Close to our gun position on the right was the La Bassée

canal, which ran due east through the German lines. The tow paths were used as thoroughfares for troops and transport. Jerry knew this and at times played havoc with coal-boxes. A horse took fright, ran off and fell down the mouth of a well. He was stuck half way down with his nose just at ground level. How do you get a horse out of a well without tractors or mechanical lifts? A crowd of Tommies who had gathered (I was one of them) solved the problem by starting to dig about twelve feet from the well, gradually working down towards it. We dug furiously, but we had ample reliefs to lessen the task. Very soon the side of the well was breached to a depth of six feet, and the animal was hauled out. Just before we left Givenchy, the RES blew up a huge mine under the German line, but no attempt was made to occupy it.

The battalion returned to Béthune and rested in the tobacco factory. It was sheer luxury to get a share of the dry clean floor to sleep on. The cooking arrangements were good too. 'Burgoo' (porridge) before the breakfast fry-up, and spotted dog (currant pudding) with dinner, were welcome fillers. The factory was near the centre of the town and an important place of interest was the Red Lamp establishment, authorised with Anglo-French consent. Captain Graves has mentioned a Blue Lamp establishment for officers, but I never thought of officers in that connexion, and I don't remember seeing a Blue Lamp.

The Red Lamp was situated at the end of a cul-de-sac which jutted off the square in the town's centre. The night I took a look was quite a shock to me. The place was jammed by a mass of khaki soldiery, spilling out into the square. There were well over a hundred and fifty men waiting for opening time, singing *Mademoiselle from Armentières* and other lusty songs. Right on the dot of 6 pm a red lamp over the doorway of the brothel was switched on. A roar went up from the troops, accompanied by a forward lunge towards the entrance. At that period in my youth I certainly had no idea that the carnal desires of men went to such lengths. A bloke told me that one chap had his leg broken in the rush a week before, and I could well believe it. Madame Tellier, de Maupassant's famous

character in his story *Madame Tellier's Establishment*, would have been horrified to witness such behaviour outside her place; or would she? I tagged on behind the crowd, irresistibly drawn. Eventually I found a seat in the bar and looked about me. There were several heavyweight chuckers-out, all wearing PT instructor's jerseys, which I swear were at one time in some British quartermaster's store. They looked formidable with their big black moustaches and their hair plastered over their foreheads with a quiff. They laid their hands on the boys, sorting them out for the dames, who stood on the steps of a spiral stairway that led to the boudoirs above. As for the dames, poor dears, they looked a jaded and worn-out lot. A couple of them were old enough to be grandmothers. Madame-in-charge, a big black-haired woman with a massive bosom, stood at the foot of the stairway, palm outstretched, demanding tribute of two francs from each candidate: one franc for madame, one franc for the dame. It was said that Red Lamps were frequently inspected by RAMC doctors, and the women medically examined. But many Tommies made random contacts with women in the back streets and got VD for their pains. These were the most unfortunate of men. Fifty years ago the disease was regarded as a dreadful and shameful contagion. Military authority subscribed to this view and dealt harshly with a Tommy VD case. He was clapped in a kind of prison hospital as an outcast, down at the base. Hard labour was his portion, with a court-martial hanging over his head. The substance of the charge against him was that by his action he had so disabled himself as to become a casualty. That was the predicament he was in, as we in the trenches understood it. The stigma was such that very few front-line Tommies, in spite of the misery and danger they had to endure, would have swapped places with a VD man at a base hospital.

15 | Awash at Festubert

After four days' rest the battalion moved towards the trenches at Festubert. Looking back, I always think of my time there as one of the worst of my experiences, not so much because of enemy action, but because of the miserable conditions. To start with, the front-line area was flooded and the communication trenches had vanished under water. There was no front-line trench. Instead, earthworks, constructed of sandbags piled up on top of the original parapet, had been made. These earthworks or breastworks were like islands jutting out of the water, about twenty yards long, and spaced out every three or four hundred yards. A Vickers gun team was posted on each island to defend the line, while the rest of the battalion kept in the rear, clear of the swamp. Before taking over one of the islands, our gun team was issued with thigh-length rubber boots, which were excellent provided the water did not reach over the tops. In intense darkness, a guide led us towards the line. We left the firmness of the road and struck across country, encountering the first of a chain of duckboards strung out on supports above the water.

Lance-Corporal Snowy Hankin was Number One and carried the tripod; myself as Number Two carried the gun; and the rest of the team humped the remaining gear. Each man had his rifle and ammo, which further hampered his movements when balancing on the duckboards. It was stilly quiet, and the clatter we made must have been heard by Jerry. Suddenly a machine gun opened fire, the bullets passing about twenty yards to the right. The enemy gunner started a spraying action, and bullets lashed all over the place. It was too much for us to stand up to, and to a man we leapt off our precarious perch into the drink and crouched as low as possible. It was a hellish few moments, but we all survived. The water poured into our boots and two poor devils fell over, completely immersed. In a flash we were reduced to a state of exasperating misery and discomfort. The gun team we relieved spoke in whispers, and told us they could hear the Germans talking.

Wishing us a happy Christmas, the relieved team crept away like ghosts, and we were left in the inky blackness. It was in fact 23rd December 1915, and we were to be stuck on the island for four days.

We perched on a small strip of earth to avoid slipping into the water. The night was quiet, and when daylight came, we realised there was barely four feet of cover. Bent nearly double, unable to stand, we waited as the hours dragged on, longing for darkness so that we could stretch our limbs a little. Watch was kept by periscope. Several times a sniper trimmed the top of the breastwork, making us sweat blood. The barbed wire in front was nearly submerged, but Jerry's wire was clear, as the ground was a few feet higher there.

It was Christmas Eve, and just after dark a 2nd Lieutenant came to visit us. I think his name was Clark. Among other things, he came to remind us that by order of the Commander-in-Chief there was not to be any fraternising with the enemy on Christmas Day. The whole world knew that on Christmas Day, 1914, there *was* some fraternising at one part of the line, and even an attempt at a game of football. Troops in the front line a year later were naturally speculating on whether a repeat performance would develop and, if so, where. Speaking for my companions and myself, I can categorically state that we were in no mood for any joviality with Jerry. In fact, after what we had been through since Loos, we hated his bloody guts. We were bent on his destruction at each and every opportunity for all the miseries and privations which were our lot. Our greatest wish was to be granted an enemy target worthy of our Vickers gun.

Sad it is for me to tell that Mr Clark was shot through the head shortly after arriving on the island. A machine gun swept the breastwork and got him. He died on the little strip of earth in the early hours of Christmas Day. It seemed to be another case of a life thrown away because a man was tall. Mr Clark was a giant. Why the military bosses overlooked this shocking handicap to tall men in trench warfare, I don't know. It will never be known how many men lost their lives from

wounds received at the six foot mark or above. Surely the artillery was the place for tall chaps, where they were not over-vulnerable by reason of their height. It was bad enough for me at five feet nine and a half always to remember the height of a parapet.

Our thoughts turned to home and our loved ones on Christmas Day. No letters came; no parcels; nothing. The soggy rations were of the meanest kind, the only pretence at Christmas being a few raisins covered with hairs and other foreign matter from the inside of a sandbag. Stretcher-bearers came after dark for the young dead officer. They had a terrible job carrying him over the duckboards. Later that night it so happened that Jerry was fated to pay a penalty for the officer's death; at least that was the way we chose to look at it.

We became aware of movement and activity in front of the German positions opposite us, where the ground rose slightly. Voices came clearly across No Man's Land, also the sound of hammering. In fact it was the most careless bit of enemy movement we had ever heard, causing us to wonder whether it was thought, because it was Christmas night, we would refrain from hostile action. If such was the case, then Jerry made a mistake. Snowy and I reckoned it was a wiring party not more than eighty yards away, and that if we were careful we could bag a good many of them. Leaving the rest of the team on the island, we took the Vickers with muzzle-extension attached, and a full belt of ammo. Stealthily working our way thigh-deep in water, we came to a point fifty yards clear of the island, and lay on a mound of wet earth. Using a short emergency tripod, Snowy adopted a comfortable firing position close to the ground. For a few moments we listened to the noise and chatter coming across No Man's Land, which gave us true direction. I fired a Verey light into the darkness, and its brilliant white glare clearly revealed the figures of twenty or more Jerries spread out by their wire to a width of thirty yards. The majority of them wore *pickelhaubes*, the Kaiser-like spiked helmets. Giving them no time to disperse, Snowy pressed the trigger of the Vickers, and I fired a second Verey

light. The flare burst, casting its glare on the tottering ghost-like figures as they fell. Swiftly, as if wielding a two-edged sword, Snowy plied the hail of bullets. Two Jerries ran into their wire and were trapped. The ground where the enemy had fallen was raked across the width as they lay, to finish off any crafty ones who might be feigning death. The second flare had just about burnt itself out as the firing stopped. The whole thing lasted no more than thirty seconds. In my imagination I can still hear the sound of the machine gun as it stuttered across the flooded land, the echoes fading into black silence. At first there was a deadly quiet after the firing had ceased, and then came the sound of whistles blowing, cries and shouting. That was good enough for us. Wading back, we joined our companions. They had witnessed the slaughter, and unanimously agreed that very few Jerries could have survived. Enemy activity in front of us continued for some time, and we were tempted to administer another dose. Being reasonably certain that German stretcher-bearers were at work, we stayed our hand.

Many years later, an American Jew named Ben Hecht said he had 'a happy holiday in his heart' every time a British soldier was killed in Palestine. That about sums up what we felt like towards Jerry on that Christmas night many years ago. The age-old sentiment of 'goodwill to all men' meant nothing to us then. With ten million men under arms on the Western and Eastern fronts, the expression was invalid. Jerry retaliated with whizz-bangs, and got one within five yards of our position. This was close enough for the scanty cover of the breastwork.

Our relief came on the fifth night, and back we plodded to the welcome dry warmth of the Béthune tobacco factory. The ten-kilometre journey from the island at Festubert was exhausting in thigh-boots. Before I could flop down there were things to be done. I had to secure a little bit of floor space to lie on; scramble for blankets and rations; remove mud-encrusted clothing from the waist downwards, revealing the half pickled skin beneath; deal with any irritant lice; and keep an eye cocked in the direction of my possessions for fear of

swiping—all these jobs and several others just had to be done. The sooner I milled around to get the process through, the sooner I could slip under the blankets into unconsciousness.

After four days' rest and blessed sleep came nine days in the front line at Givenchy, followed by four days' rest in Béthune. Then we went back for five days to Festubert, where we were on the same island as before. Nothing of special significance happened on these spells. The enemy continued to shell the Givenchy and Cuinchy brickfields heavily.

On 18th January 1916 we marched out of the war area to Gonnahem, a drab village five kilometres from Béthune. In fact the whole of the 12th Division was relieved for the first time since the battle of Loos. Number 13 Platoon was billeted in the cosy loft of a barn, full of luxurious hay and straw. Rats ran along the beams and rifled our packs, but we didn't worry. All we wanted was warmth and plenty to eat. It was at Gonnahem that I decided to jettison my souvenirs, weighing nearly twenty pounds, which I had been lugging around in my pack. German fuse tops, funny-shaped bits of shrapnel and a rusty saw-edge bayonet were among this collection of old iron. Why I had been torturing myself with this agonising load I don't know—just a boyish habit of collecting something out of the ordinary I suppose. 'You're just a bloody twerp carting that lot about', my pals scoffed. And so, my eyes opened at last, I chucked the stuff away, not without regret, but with substantial relief when the time came to move off.

We had now been in France eight months and had gone through the fires. Christmas was past, and what of the future? To tell the truth, deep down in me I was scared of the future. For the first few months of trench life it had been a kind of dangerous fun to me. Although only a boy I had lived with grown men, sharing their fears and dangers. It was still fun when not in the trenches. Up in the front line, however, anything approaching merriment was dead. Rude jokes, yes, but no merriment. Everyone has an appetite for amusement and pleasure, the same as for eating. We were starved of the joys and pleasures of life. The dreadful winter, coupled with the

constant fear of death, and insufficient food, produced a yearning for England and home. I felt that if only I could get leave to see Blighty and know it was really there, I would be able to stick it out.

16 | Blighty leave

Rumours circulated about leave, and there was much speculation regarding the method of selection and issue of passes. The battalion cleaned up and commenced routine chores and exercises. At the finish of a route march on 24th January, I was ordered to report to the battalion orderly room, and with some trepidation I presented myself. There I was handed a telegram from my mother telling me that my stepfather had been killed in France a few days before. He was a sergeant serving in the East Surreys. A coal-box dropped in a crowded trench and killed him and six of his men. Compassionate leave was granted me, and I was in a daze when I reported to the Railway Transport Officer at Chocques late that night. This dramatic turn in my life bewildered me. I was not at all happy at going home under such conditions, but, being young, I soon brightened up. My outstanding regret was that a meeting which my stepfather and I had been trying to arrange could not take place.

I arrived in England on my 18th birthday, 26th January 1916. It had become the fashion to welcome home troops at Victoria Station. People pressed forward from the waiting crowds and gave me packets of cigarettes and chocolate. Religious organisations provided lashings of buffet fare and hot drinks. It was just marvellous for a Tommy's homecoming. Leave men carried their rifles, and this usually indicated that they had arrived from the front. Most people knew this, and when I went into a pub at East Croydon it never cost me a penny. It was a wonderful thing to feel that people really did care about the Tommies.

Of course, I did not relish seeing my mother a widow, or my little half sisters and brother fatherless. I visited all my dear relatives, and a happy welcome they gave me. My uncle, A. E. Coppard, loaned me his motor bike for a couple of days and I remember how cocky I felt, thinking that people imagined I was a dispatch rider.

The wrench came when I had to say goodbye and return to France. Heart-breaking scenes occurred when the troop trains departed. I was in tears. With the companionship of other Tommies, plenty of cigarettes and other good things in my haversack, I soon forgot the tears, especially when I was roped in for a game of Pontoon.

The weather was wild at Folkestone, and for two days we hung about waiting. On the third day I boarded the packet-boat. Feeling hungry, I scoffed a couple of pork pies. I joined a Brag school in a warm alleyway alongside the engine room and the game proceeded as the ship moved off in the darkness. She began to roll and plunge as she crossed the bar, with worse to follow, so that even a prial of threes couldn't hold me to the game any longer. The pies erupted violently as I staggered off for air. On arriving back at Gonnehem I struggled hard to get into the harsh routine of active service again.

I did not know until after the war that at about this time an uncle of mine, acting on behalf of my mother, wrote to the War Office, pointing out that I was only just 18 years old, and had already 'done my bit' in France for eight months. In view of this he claimed my discharge on the grounds that I was under age, the age for enlistment being 19. The War Office replied by saying that their records showed that I was 19 years old on enlistment and, that being my official age, I could not be released. Apparently the production of my birth certificate cut no ice with them. What a stony-hearted lot they were in those days!

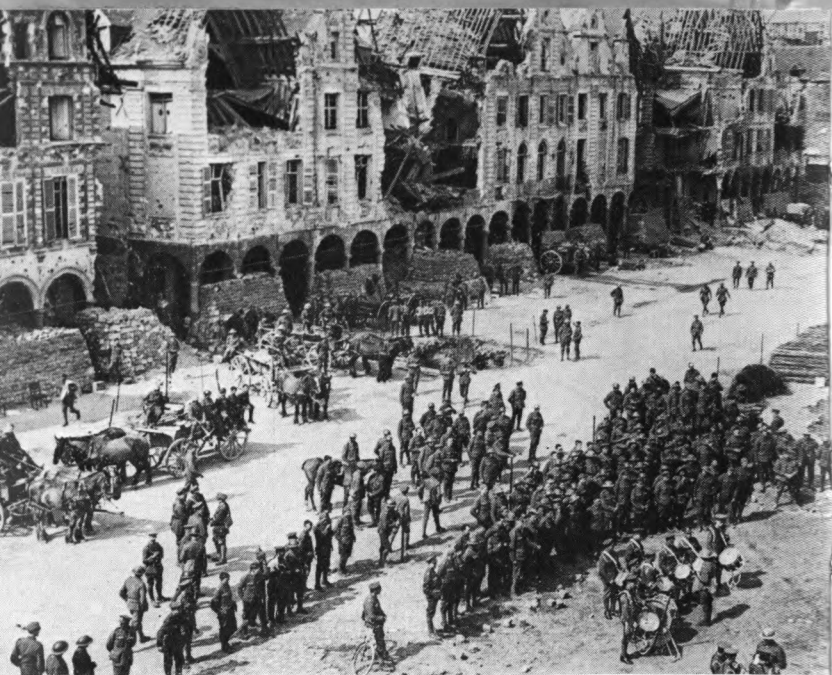
17 | I am transferred to the Machine Gun Corps

On 5th February 1916 the machine gun section of the 6th Battalion the Queen's was brigaded into the 37th Machine Gun Company of the Machine Gun Corps. We became 'A' Section, probably owing to our regimental seniority. All personnel were issued with new identity discs, and my new regimental number was 19012. I had some regrets at losing the Queen's badge with the lamb, but welcomed the new one with two crossed Vickers guns surmounted by the British crown.

There were new faces everywhere, especially among the officers. It was exciting to feel that we were no longer in a small unit, subject to the whims and dictates of every infantry officer and NCO. From then on, as members of a specialised corps, we came under the orders of our own superiors. Carried down the scale, this meant that an unpaid lance-corporal in charge of a gun in action, who became detached from his own superiors, would be the sole judge as to the best position for his gun, and when and where it should be fired.

Our first CO was Captain D. K. Anderson, a Scot, and a bit of a Tartar to boot. By this I mean that he was dedicated to the task of bringing his new company to a condition of almost brutal efficiency. The standard drill for going into action was complicated, and long and hard practice was needed to get a team into really good shape. On the blow of a whistle, Number One dashed five yards with the tripod, released the ratchet-held front legs so that they swung forward, both pointing outwards, and secured them rigidly by tightening the ratchet handles. Sitting down, he removed two metal pins from the head of the tripod, whereupon Number Two placed the gun in position on the tripod. Number One whipped in the pins and the gun was then ready for loading. Number Three dashed forward with an ammunition box containing a canvas belt, pocketed to hold 250 rounds. Number Two inserted the brass tag-end of the belt into the feed-block on the right side of the gun. Number One grabbed the tag-end poking through the





Previous page/The author (seated) on convalescent leave, March 1918, with Sergeant E. Walton, a relative.
[Q71266]

Top left/British military band playing in the Grande Place, Arras, 30 April 1917.
[Q6407]

Bottom left/Machine gunners filling the water jacket of their Vickers gun.
[Q6317]

Right/Albert: the Leaning Virgin, 1917. The gilded statue of the Virgin and Child which surmounted the church was knocked sideways by a German shell early in 1915. It was a popular belief in the British army that its fall would signify the end of the war. The statue was maintained in its precarious position by the Royal Engineers and thousands of British troops gazed up at it as they passed through Albert on their way to the Somme. After the British withdrawal from Albert in March 1918 the church tower was demolished to prevent its use by the Germans as an observation post. The statue was never found.
[CO 2132]



Above/The attack on the Hohenzollern Redoubt, 13 September 1915.
A cloud of smoke and gas can be seen in the centre and left
of the picture, bursting shells in the centre and right.
The British trenches and approaches are marked by the lines
of excavated chalk. Units of the 46th (North Midland)
Division managed to penetrate the redoubt but were driven
back with heavy losses. [Q29001]



Below/View of the battlefield at Thiepval, September 1916.
Thiepval, a key point in the German defences, was one of the British army's objectives on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. It was taken after 89 days of savage fighting, which reduced the village to a mass of rubble. It was not rebuilt after the war. Thiepval Memorial records the names of over 70,000 officers and men who were killed during the Somme offensive and who have no known grave. [Q1073]



**Top left/German
signpost in Tilloy,
April 1917, remembered
by the author.**
[Q1999]

**Bottom left/Machine
gun post of the 62nd
Battalion, Machine
Gun Corps.**
[Q11088]

**Top right/Shrapnel
bursting over
Canadian troops in
reserve trenches, 1916.**
[CO 806]

**Bottom right/Raiding
party of the 9th
Battalion, the
Cameronians (Scottish
Rifles) going over
the top, 11 April 1917.**
[Q5101]







Advanced dressing station near Ginchy, 14 September 1916. [Q1220]
 Arrival of the leave train at Victoria. [Q30515]



left side, jerked it through, at the same time pulling back the crank handle twice, which completed the loading operation. For sighting, the flick of a finger sprang the stem of the rear sight into a vertical position, and a rapid selection of ranges was provided by a spring-loaded wheel, turned up or down as necessary. Part of the drill when practising on the butts was to knock over steel target plates, and we were expected to do this by accuracy of aim, and not by watching the dirt fly as a guide to the target. At Gonnehem we practised for hours, day after day, and gradually improvement came throughout the entire company. Captain Anderson was never satisfied unless our hands were bleeding. The more bits of skin that were knocked off the better he liked it.

Stripping the gun to change a barrel or replace broken parts, and re-assembling at speed, was a drill of great importance. Several hours were actually spent in doing some of the jobs when blindfolded, in order to achieve the utmost familiarity with the different parts of the gun. The different types of stoppages were indicated by the position of the crank handle when firing ceased, and all gunners were trained to remove the cause of a stoppage in a matter of seconds. Our CO was not a man to give fulsome praise, but he looked pretty satisfied with his new company after ten days' hard work.

The company's new sergeant major was E. S. Fuggle, a man of Kent, who came to us from the machine gun section of the 6th Buffs. He was just turned twenty-one and was naturally very keen at that age. We youngsters liked him, for he seemed more intelligent than the majority of CSMs. On 16th February we returned to Béthune and billeted in empty houses opposite the railway station. There was a tidy air raid on the station, which, although trifling compared with World War Two standards, was startling. One bomb dropped in the backyard and blew out all the windows.

18 | Return to the Hohenzollern Redoubt

The new company marched to Vermelles, and straight into the line, 'A' Section supporting the Queen's in the Hohenzollern Redoubt. It had been arranged that, as far as possible, each section would support its old regiment, a sensible idea which was warmly received. This spell had a new experience for me, that of officer's batman. I found myself attached to Lieutenant J. Wilkie, a Scot. I wasn't sure what being a batman involved, but it turned out to be a good opportunity to see things from an officer's point of view. Was I recommended for or relegated to the job? I don't know, but I soon found out to my great pleasure that Mr Wilkie regarded me as a comrade, and I grew very attached to him. He was about twenty years old, had a boyish plumpness and wore a tricky little moustache which I secretly envied. I do believe he was the first Scotsman I had ever met that I came to appreciate and understand, and his brogue was fascinating to listen to. His home was in Sanderstead, near Croydon, which fact provided something in common between us.

Instead of being stuck in the front line, I shared with Mr Wilkie a half-completed German dugout in a support trench. It had twenty steps leading down to a fair-sized room with hefty timber supports. There was only one entrance, facing the wrong way. The location was well within minnie range, and a hit on the entrance would have been disastrous. With the foulest of luck, a minnie could have pitched straight down the steps. Compared with the lot of my pals in the front line and craters, the dugout was a 'little bit of Heaven'. It was a refuge in between patrols. Mr Wilkie was a very conscientious officer, and frequently visited the four guns in his charge; and I was always with him. When on patrol, my role was that of a body-guard, guide and guarantor of the officer's *bona fides*. It was not unknown for a German with a good knowledge of English to masquerade as a British officer, enter our lines at night and get back to his own lines. A risky job,

but it had been done.

I remember during the Loos battle seeing a very military-looking major complete with monocle, and wearing a white collar. He asked me the way to Hay Alley and spoke good English. I never suspected that anything was wrong, though I was puzzled about his collar, as all our officers were then wearing khaki collars. Shortly after there was a scare, and officers dashed about trying to find the gallant major, but he had vanished.

When in the dugout I looked after the grub side. Being a domesticated person I rather enjoyed it. The rations were the same as for the men, but they looked better. We ate together, sang songs and indulged in a game of cribbage occasionally.

On my frequent visits to company HQ I saw the kind of life the officers led when not in the front line or on patrol. Their greatest comfort was sleeping-bags and blankets, and room to stretch out for sleep. Batmen were handy to fetch and carry. Meals and drinks were prepared and placed before them. In addition to rum, whisky was available, and a popular brand was 'Old Orkney' or, as the troops called it, 'Officers Only', at 2/6 per bottle. Cartoons and pin-ups decorated the walls, and there was never a lack of the precious weed. Such things, and many other small trifles, demonstrated the great difference between the creature comforts of the officers, and the almost complete absence of them for the men. That's what the war was like.

Generally speaking, the disparity in rank between officers and other ranks when in the trenches was a little less marked than normally. You could call it a temporary attempt at chumminess. NCOs were more matey by far than when out of the line, when they resorted to the traditional bullying. Was it nervousness, or merely being toffee-nosed that made some officers hard to get on with? Few, thank goodness, were sadists. Robert Graves in *Goodbye to All That* says, 'My greatest difficulty was to talk to the men with the necessary air of authority'. I can well believe that remark, as many officers seemed to be troubled with the same thing. The nervousness,

strain and irritability of his officers could be responsible for a lot of what Tommy had to put up with. In the final analysis he was always the butt. Robert Graves understood all this, and after he was wounded he said that if he ever went back to France, he would 'endeavour to make things easier for the men'.

A heavy fall of snow made patrolling very hard going. The bitter cold made it difficult to keep the guns ready for instant action. Glycerine was added to the water in the cooling jackets to prevent freezing. Mr. Wilkie visited his guns even more frequently in foul weather. One was in a crater, and the periodic relief of the team had to be supervised. On getting back to the dugout after patrolling, I'd quickly prepare a hot drink of some sort. Although twenty feet down, the blast of minnies often blew out the candle, and the trembling earth above would drop in showers on our heads.

We had six days of this, and then five days' rest in Béthune, but the company returned to the same sector again on 6th March. The ferocity of the crater fighting had increased even more, and the 37th Brigade was hard-pressed defending the eight craters then held. According to report, the crater and trench fighters of the brigade were slinging at Jerry an average of 30,000 bombs a day, for three days. The enemy retaliation was equally terrible, and we suffered 3,000 casualties in the fourteen-day spell in that area.

On the night of 18th March the enemy shelled our lines heavily with gas shells and, in the general confusion that followed, he attacked and captured A and C craters. Owing to lack of reinforcements, no counter attack was possible. Our artillery bashed Jerry's neighbouring trenches good and hard, but the newly-captured craters escaped their fire. Gas helmets were worn for three hours, and I was nearly suffocated. The helmet was nothing more than a flannel bag soaked in a chemical solution with a piece of mica for a window, which soon steamed up in spite of anti-mist treatment. The primitive mask issued when we first arrived in France consisted of a piece of muslin holding a pad of cotton wool. In the event of a

gas attack, we were told to urinate on the pad and bind it over mouth and nose. During the short time we had these early masks, happily for us, no gas came our way. But if it had, the comical side of the situation would have quickly become dramatic for those who couldn't produce. Gas was a devilish weapon, against which those early masks made it impossible to measure one's chances of survival.

'B' Company of the Queen's were the victims of a villainous trick by the Prussians during this spell. Three hundred of them came across No Man's Land feigning surrender, with no rifles or equipment, their hands held high, but with pockets full of egg bombs. Just before reaching our wire they flung themselves to the ground and hurled a rain of bombs into 'B' Company's trench, causing many casualties. The blow was so severe that the remnants of the company were unable to put up any strong retaliation. The rest of the battalion was sullen and furious about the trick and called the Prussians bloody bastards. Many vowed some dark revenge when any prisoners were taken. Most Vickers gunners swore a private vendetta. From then on, the advance of a crowd of Jerries with their hands up would be the signal to open fire.

The Berkshires relieved the Queen's on 19th March, and our company marched to Béthune. I grew to love the little town, drab though it was. The estaminets with their cheap wine and feeds of eggs and chips were paradise to us. I had a few extra francs to spend too as there was my batman's pay, amounting to a minimum of half a crown per week. Of course, I had to work hard for this. Mr Wilkie's uniform, as well as my own, was stiff with dried mud. It was a good day's work to get the officer's gear all spruced up. However, I managed to escape one or two parades when assisting in the officers' mess, where I waited at table. Listening to the officers' conversation was an intriguing experience, and I was greatly surprised at the deference shown to the CO. Captain Anderson was very much the top man.

Came 28th March, and back we were in that hell hole, the Hohenzollern Redoubt. Mr Wilkie found another German

dugout in a support trench called 'Pilgrim's Progress', but we made but little progress I'm afraid, though it was mighty lucky for us that the dugout had two entrances. Within half an hour of taking over, a minnie smacked down, destroying one of the entrances and nearly wrecking the twenty-foot chamber. Mr Wilkie was wounded in the mouth, though not seriously enough to cause him to leave the trenches. Both of us were badly shaken, and it was some while before we got over the dread feeling of what might have happened. The officer produced some rum, and a hefty swig each worked wonders. In fact I think we were just a little bit tight after it.

The bitter cold formed ice on top of the sloppy mud, and it was almost impossible to achieve sufficient movement to circulate the blood properly. For men huddled in a few feet of trench or in the craters it must have been murder. The officer and I were lucky in having to patrol the four guns, covering over half a mile to do so, after which we sweated like bulls. Fortunately, winter clothing had been issued, including sleeveless leather jerkins with fur attached, Balaclava caps with ear flaps and lined fingerless gloves. Many cases of trench feet developed. This was a pickling of the skin and flesh caused by the persistent cold and wet, and hospital treatment was a long business. Tins of whale oil were supplied for rubbing into the feet. I rigorously kept up this drill and my feet never bothered me.

Mr Wilkie caught a heavy cold. A sore throat and high temperature followed, and he looked ill. He reported sick, and to my surprise it transpired that he was entitled to his batman while in hospital. An ambulance took us to Chocques, where there was an officer's hospital called Le Chateau. A brief entry in my diary says, 'Here we had a lazy time and plenty of good grub'. What more could a young soldier ask for? In eight days Mr Wilkie was fully recovered, but on the way back to Vermelles it was my turn to feel groggy. I had a high temperature and was ordered to go sick. I remember that after a week in hospital at Béthune I failed to get a lift back to Vermelles. Within four hours of leaving the hospital, I joined Mr Wilkie in the Hohenzollern Redoubt, and I felt real scared.

The next day was Good Friday. Being an old choir boy of Brighton and Croydon parish churches, my thoughts turned to the Christian meaning of that day, and of the several three-hour services I had attended in the past on Good Fridays. All that was over and seemed meaningless. My identity disc and pay-book said my religion was 'C of E'. To me and most Tommies this meant compulsion to attend church parade on Sundays if the company happened to be well out of the fighting zone. I had a glimpse of an army chaplain now and then, but never anywhere near the trenches. In fact one chaplain had a reputation for being hot stuff at cards and having a strong liking for the bottle. It was no use calling yourself an atheist, as it was considered an old trick to dodge church parade, which, of course, it was. I remember once listening to a talk by the Reverend Studdart Kennedy. He said he went to the front line, and while there a strafe started. A sergeant saw him and said, 'Who are you?' 'I'm the Church,' replied the chaplain. 'Then what the bloody hell are you doing here?' queried the sergeant. The Reverend Kennedy's theme for his talk was, 'There's a time and place for all things, including religion'.

There was only one person I knew whose professed religious belief did him any good, and that was a Jew named Levinsky. He came to our company on a draft, and had only been with us for about four weeks when he was given a week's leave in Blighty to attend customs in connexion with the Passover. It is not difficult to imagine the feelings of Gentiles in the company who had been in France for a year with no leave, or hope of any, in the foreseeable future.

On the morning of Easter Sunday the Germans blew up two mines in the redoubt. The blast from one of them knocked Mr Wilkie off his feet. We saw the bulging piecrust slowly rise before the centre burst, hurling the vast mass upwards. In a few moments the descent began and the ground shook with the buffeting. Like frightened rabbits, we squirmed to the side of the trench. One piece of earth, no more than two ounces in weight, struck the nape of my neck. I had a black-out for a short while, but beyond a stiff neck for a week, I was none the

worse off for the tap. The Queen's lost men that Easter morning from the two explosions which destroyed the front line where they were standing. Jerry made no attempt to capture the craters.¹

19 | The 12th Division rests

Relief came on 25th May and we marched back to Vermelles brewery for the night. Next day we entrained from Noeux les Mines to Lillers. Some top brass must have taken pity on us after what we had been through. Our journey ended in the pleasant village of Allouagne, five kilometres from Lillers. Mr Wilkie was billeted in a comfortable room in a farmhouse, while I had quarters in a little bakehouse at the top end of the farmyard. 'A' Section occupied a cosy barn on another side of the yard, which was full of sweet-smelling manure. Cattle and poultry scratched and lazed around, and watching them was a simple pleasure, the very essence of peace and tranquillity.

Named Bailleul, the farmer and his wife were typical French peasants, and had two teenage daughters, Marie and Maria. The family were very kind and frequently invited me to supper, though I wasn't keen on the cabbage soup which they seemed to have every night. Maria would often give me a whacking great slice of bread of her own making, liberally spread with fresh salted butter, which I helped to produce. Milk was put in a barrel which had a rod through the centre, resting on bear-

¹In a recent quarterly News Letter of the Machine Gun Corps Old Comrades Association, there was an item from a member who was at the Hohenzollern Redoubt in 1918. He says:

'I had my moments in the Redoubt in 1918. I think it was 9th October when the rumour went along the line, 'JERRY IS GONE'. It was true. We were ordered to pack up and move forward to where Hulluch once stood. The end of the Redoubt, bitterly known to Mr Coppard and thousands of others, was as simple as that.'

With very little movement, the fighting in the redoubt lasted over three years.

ings. I sat and oscillated the barrel by pulling a cord, while Maria darned Mr Wilkie's socks. It was a great pity I couldn't speak French, but the eyes played their part, and I was quite happy just to sit and look at Maria without speaking.

For some days I was employed in the officers' mess. When the officers were out, I improved my musical education on their gramophone. Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* was my favourite, and his *Spring Song* and *Wedding March* tied for second place. A very good third was *Melody in F* by Rubinstein. I loved that gramophone. To the toll of the village church bell one Sunday, numbers of angelic-looking children, dressed in white, hurried along to be confirmed by the bishop. It was a pretty sight, but somehow a little perplexing, for there was I, not very much older than some of the children, caught up in the blood and thunder of a ghastly war.

The weather was good, and all units in the division were engaged in training of some sort. Then came big schemes of manoeuvring and mock battles. Staff officers, red-tabbed and beribboned, dashed all over the place with immense bravado, giving their orders and comments in crackling military style. I certainly admired them for their immaculate appearance. Most Tommies looked such a scruffy lot by comparison. One thing was certain, and that was the near approach of an offensive against the enemy.

Company sports took place, and I picked up two francs as second prize in the batman's race. I knew next to nothing about horses or mules, but allowed myself to be kidded into competing in the mule race. My mount, named Norman, was generally regarded as the most recalcitrant of the stubborn bunch who pulled our limbers. The distance was a quarter of a mile, and the course ran alongside a field of corn. Norman shot ahead and cunningly suggested that I was on my way to an easy victory, but he veered sharply and deliberately bucked me off. So ended my first and only mule ride.

In the evenings there were Housey-Housey sessions outside an estaminet in the middle of the village, with crowds of Tommies sitting on the ground knocking back wine and beer.

The game—called Bingo today—was the only game of chance allowed in the army then. Those in the mood for more serious gambling games, such as Crown and Anchor, Banker or Pontoon, slunk off to lonely spots, away from the vigilance of the military police. At that time some of the French paper money was issued by the Chambers of Commerce of various towns, Amiens, Arras and so on. The notes were of small value, from half a franc to two francs. I was curious about the facsimile signature of the cashier on one of the notes. It was Édouard Coppard. There are a few Coppards in Sussex, and as I first saw the light of day in that county I wondered whether Édouard was very distantly related to me, way back in 1066. At the end of a Housey session, the top dogs running it threw away the dirty notes of small value, and a rough house in the dirt was a sight worth watching as Tommies fought for the notes.

One fine evening, with a big crowd all set for a game, two military policemen appeared with a handcuffed prisoner, and, in full view of the crowd and villagers, tied him to the wheel of a limber, cruciform fashion. The poor devil, a British Tommy, was undergoing Field Punishment Number One, and this public exposure was a part of the punishment. There was a dramatic silence as every eye watched the man being fastened to the wheel, and some jeering started. Scenting trouble, the Housey-Housey king shouted out, 'Eyes down! Look in! Kelly's eye! Harry Tate!' and the game got under way. An hour passed and suddenly a scuffle started, with a couple of Tommies rolling on the ground and making a great show of pummelling each other. The military policemen ran over to separate them, but the two frolickers assured the police that the scramble was just a friendly caper. In the meantime, the prisoner had gulped down several swigs from a bottle of wine neatly produced by other conspirators. Lashing men to a wheel in public in a foreign country was one of the most disgraceful things in the war. Troops resented these exhibitions, but they continued until 1917, when the War Minister put a stop to them, following protests in Parliament.

I believe that an important modification of the death sen-

tence also took place in 1917. It appeared that the military authorities were compelled to take heed of the clamour against the death sentences imposed by courts martial. There had been too many of them. As a result, a man who would otherwise have been executed was instead compelled to take part in the forefront of the first available raid or assault on the enemy. He was purposely placed in the first wave to cross No Man's Land and it was left to the Almighty to decide his fate. This was the situation as we Tommies understood it, but nothing official reached our ears. I have no knowledge whether a prisoner surviving an attack on the enemy had expiated his offence by deliberate exposure to the will of Providence. Let the War Office dig out its musty files and tell us how many men were treated in this way, and how many survived the cruel sentences. Shylock, in demanding his pound of flesh, had got nothing on the military bigwigs in 1917.

Historians say that Haig had the confidence of his men. I very much doubt whether this was strictly true. He had such a vast number of troops under his command and was so completely remote from the actual fighting that he was merely a name, a figurehead. In my view, it was not confidence in him that the men had, but simply their ingrained sense of duty and obedience, in keeping with the times. They were wholly loyal to their own officers, and that was as far as their confidence went. It was trust and comradeship founded on the actual sharing of dangers together.

Divisional training continued well into June. Lord Kitchener had just been drowned at sea when travelling to Russia on board HMS HAMPSHIRE—a strange end for a field marshal. We were puzzled by this unfortunate event, and genuinely sorry for him, as well as for the poor sailors who lost their lives. We will never know whether it would have made any difference had he reached Russia, but at the time Kitchener's death seemed an ill omen.

On the night of 14th June, in conjunction with the French, we advanced our time in accordance with the Daylight Saving Act. Two days later we left Allouagne, and I was sorry to say

farewell to the Bailleul family, especially Maria. She wrote me one letter that I could hardly read, and that was the end.

The company marched to Lillers and entrained for Amiens. It was strange marching through the city, with big solid buildings on either side of the streets. The shops were open, and the market place was packed. One of the officers had returned from leave with four mouth organs, and 'Tipperary' was in full swing as we marched past the great cathedral. Women and children waved flags and cheered as the column moved on. We slogged along on the hot cobbled stones for eighteen kilometres, which brought us to Naours, a lonely unlovely village. Nobody had any money except a few coppers. In the dull evenings we played 'Penny up the line'. To brighten our lives, the Queen's fife and drum band played a few martial airs before retreat. One of the tunes was the regimental march, and the traditional words, 'Here they come, here they come, bloody great bastards every one', seemed appropriate to a crowd of troops with very little money. There were supposed to be some famous subterranean caves near the village, but few of us were interested in such a dull subject. Being without money was a pretty painful ordeal. We had some pay due to us, but got nothing. This occurred many times. Hundreds of men mouching around in a lonely village without the price of a drink is an unhappy sight. The officers with their duty-free whisky would be having a riotous booze-up in the best house in the village, and we poor blighters would be fuming and cursing. The carousing officers' sing-song would echo long into the night. 'There's one green bottle hanging on the wall', and 'Old Macdonald has a farm', were two of their popular numbers, invariably accompanied by rhythmic thumping. Out of pure envy, we'd work up a counter-rumpus in nearby billets by banging on tin cans, and shouting and whistling until silenced by some awful threat from the orderly sergeant. I don't blame the officers for having a booze-up, but the men expected their pay on the dot, or there was trouble. My saddest memory of the war is my continual state of poverty.

20 | The Somme Battle, 1916

On 27th June the company left Naours and marched to St Gratien, which was on the road to Albert. Steel helmets had been issued, and with the extra weight and bulk we didn't much care for them. The time came when I couldn't bear the thought of being without my helmet. Our rifles had been handed in and revolvers issued in lieu, but we retained our bayonets. I had a Colt .45—quite a weapon. Revolver handling had been part of our recent training, and we had had a good deal of target practice. As machine gunners, there is no doubt that we were by that time an extremely efficient lot, and we were going into the Somme battle with confidence in our officers, and in our ability to get the best possible results from our Vickers guns. With a year's actual fighting experience behind us, and our intensive training, we knew what to do and how to do it. The parts which we each and severally were to play were in the hands of Fate. The bulk of the company were men of Surrey and Kent, good solid stock. So far as I know there were no poets or writers among us. We were merely the raw material to inspire the lofty musings of others. And so, on we went, singing the bawdy songs we loved so well, towards one of the greatest, most terrible and frustrating battles in history. 'Today's my daughter's wedding day. Twenty thousand pounds I'll give away. Hooray! Hooray! . . .'

The joint Anglo-French attack was designed to relieve heavy German pressure on Verdun in the south. According to the special commemorative issues of the French magazine *Paris Match* in August 1964, 26 divisions were British and 14 were French, and the total territory gained during the whole of the Somme battle was about eighty square kilometres. The salient of captured land was thirty-nine kilometres in width, with a maximum depth of eight kilometres: roughly seven miles square. For this miserable fraction of the earth's surface, approximately three-quarters of a million British and French soldiers became casualties. The reference books state that the battle lasted from 1st July to 20th November, and that the

total British loss was 22,293 officers, and 476,553 NCOs and men. Judging from the articles in *Paris Match*, written fifty years after the great battle, the pressure on Verdun was not greatly reduced. If this is true, then a stalemate is the best that can be said for the Somme offensive, but a points win for Jerry seems nearer the truth.

On the night of 30th June the 37th Machine Gun Company rested in a field near Albert. A fierce bombardment of the German lines was going on. We were in the area of the big guns of 9.2-inch calibre. They were underneath camouflage nets and looked huge, bigger than anything we'd seen before. Six-inch Long Toms—a naval gun adapted for land use I believe—were belching flames when fired, and 4.7-inch howitzers nearer the front lines swelled the colossal roar.

On the afternoon of 1st July, a date that will never be forgotten, we passed through Albert on our way to the front, and we knew that the great assault had started early that morning. The red brick cathedral looked in a sorry state. Adding to its wrecked appearance was the massive golden figure of the Virgin on the tall tower, bent over about 95 degrees. At first we thought that crack shooting by Jerry artillery had knocked the figure over, but later on we learned that French engineers had bent it down to prevent the enemy from using its great height as an artillery fix.

There was a terrific congestion of troops and vehicles at Crucifix Corner. The road forked there and in the angle, commanding the approach, stood a huge crucifix. The sorrowful face of Christ gazed down at the turmoil below. I remember looking at His face—a glance only—there was no time for more. Many men, who had passed by on their way to the front not many hours before, were now dead; and many more were to follow them. The left fork led to Thiepval, la Boisselle and Ovillers. The right led to Fricourt and Contalmaison. We took the left fork, glad to get away from the congestion. The thunder of the guns and the scream of shells passing close above us was nerve-racking. We were also exposed to premature bursts from the field guns close behind us, and we needed no urging

to speed up our steps. It must have been torture for the horses and mules to have to stand still when masses of stores and ammo were being unloaded. Every two or three minutes a salvo of coal-boxes crashed in the area, bringing wholesale death and destruction.

I should mention here that I was then back as Number Two in Snowy Hankin's gun team. Being a batman had its good points but somehow I felt less than a complete soldier, for though there was almost as much danger in the job there was certainly more personal comfort. I was content to be back in the team. The little pin-pricks they had occasionally dished out about my having a cushy job ceased. The other four members of the team were Marshall, Armstrong, Curly Baynes and Nobby Clark.

We moved ahead over rising ground with the Vickers and equipment, thankful that we no longer had to carry a rifle and 120 rounds of ammo. Climbing Coniston Steps, which were cut into a steep bank, we entered Aveluy Wood. Jerry was shelling it heavily with dirty black shrapnel shells, nicknamed 'Woolly Bears', having rightly guessed that the wood was packed with troops. The powerful crump of these shells bursting at tree-top level was frightening. To make things even more unpleasant, lachrymatory or tear shells literally drenched the wood. This caught us unawares, stinging the eyes painfully, and tears poured down our faces as we staggered about like blind men. It was too late to put on gas masks. We tried them but they had no effect. The noxious liquid hung about, and it was not until we were clear of the wood that we got any relief. The thick reek of smoke from explosives and tear gas clung to the foliage like fumes from a devil's cauldron, nearly shutting out the bright sky above. A winding track led through the wood, and many wounded and dying men lay on either side of it, but we could not stay to help them. A steady stream of walking wounded were making their way down to Coniston Steps, and away out of it all. I envied those who did not appear to be badly hit. One could hardly bear thinking about the agony of the badly wounded who lay unattended.

Clear of the wood at last, we climbed into a trench, and before nightfall mounted the Vickers. The name given to that part of the line was la Boisselle, a village just behind the German lines. As far as we could gather, the attack that morning had started at 7.30 am from the trench in which we stood. Darkness fell before we could sum up the situation in No Man's Land, but the number of our dead in front of the gun position was an ominous clue.

Our primary job was defence, but we put up long bursts of indirect fire throughout the night, harassing the support areas immediately behind the enemy lines. Our firing was unwelcome and attracted a steady search by a Jerry whizz-bang battery. We brought in a number of wounded men who had fallen near our trench and bandaged them up. They told us how the enemy had been picking off the wounded as they lay in shell holes under the hot sun. As we were under the eye of the enemy any properly organised rescue work was ruled out, and the wounded had mostly to tend and help each other. With a British casualty figure of 60,000 on the first day of the struggle, it was beyond the power of man to give aid except to a few. Many were out there in front of us, and their cries for help continued for days. Those who were able to crawl lived on the water and rations they could find on their dead comrades. By day, under the broiling sun, they had to lie motionless in shell holes and depressions, for fear of being finished off. At night German patrol parties were out on the prowl, and clashes occurred with British patrols making attempts at rescue work. Only a wounded man who had spent days in such a trap could really describe what it was like. I thank Providence that I was never out there.

21 | 'I've seen 'em, I've seen 'em, | hanging on the old barbed wire'

The next morning we gunners surveyed the dreadful scene in front of our trench. There was a pair of binoculars in the kit, and, under the brazen light of a hot mid-summer's day, everything revealed itself stark and clear. The terrain was rather like the Sussex downland, with gentle swelling hills, folds and valleys, making it difficult at first to pinpoint all the enemy trenches as they curled and twisted on the slopes. It eventually became clear that the German line followed points of eminence, always giving a commanding view of No Man's Land. Immediately in front, and spreading left and right until hidden from view, was clear evidence that the attack had been brutally repulsed. Hundreds of dead, many of the 37th Brigade, were strung out like wreckage washed up to a high-water mark. Quite as many died on the enemy wire as on the ground, like fish caught in a net. They hung there in grotesque postures. Some looked as though they were praying: they had died on their knees and the wire had prevented their fall. From the way the dead were equally spread out, whether on the wire or lying in front of it, it was clear that there were no gaps in the wire at the time of the attack. Concentrated machine gun fire from sufficient guns to command every inch of the wire, had done its terrible work. The Germans must have been reinforcing their wire for months. It was so dense that daylight could barely be seen through it. Through the glasses it looked a black mass. The German faith in massed wire had paid off.

How did our planners imagine that Tommies, having survived all other hazards—and there were plenty in crossing No Man's Land—would get through the German wire? Had they studied the black density of it through their powerful binoculars? Who told them that artillery fire would pound such wire to pieces, making it possible to get through? Any Tommy could have told them that shell fire lifts wire up and drops it down, often in a worse tangle than before. A vast amount of our artillery fire was directed against the enemy wire before 1st

July, but with the huge percentage of misses it was largely wasted effort. Brave men of the Royal Engineers went out at night before the assault to explode torpedoes under the wire, but the wire flopped back.

In my opinion the German troops were in no way superior to the British. What was superior beyond any doubt was the enemy trench system, built in thorough German fashion to a proper standard of strength and efficiency, and defended with large numbers of machine guns. It was the strength of this system that was seriously underestimated. The morale of the German troops behind such defences was bound to be high, as there was every likelihood that they would be able to beat off an attack. Any talk of the lack of experience of our troops is a cruel slander. If every one of our boys had been a highly-trained guardsman, he could have done no more than reach the wire—if he got as far as that—and then die. The very manner of their death is proof that our assault troops on those first terrible days hadn't a dog's chance. What I saw on the morning of 2nd July convinced me that our chaps had been totally unable to get to grips with Jerry. The reason was simple enough. Someone had blundered about the wire. Any element of initiative or surprise had already been ruined by the long bombardment of the enemy trenches, commencing as far back as 2nd June. Jerry thus had ample time to repair and strengthen his defences, and lay doggo in deep dugouts waiting for us.

There are still things to tell of the battle, and I must get back. On 2nd July Jerry opened a prolonged shelling of our sector, and one of 'A' Sections' guns was blown up, two of the team being badly wounded. On the same day Snowy and I had a narrow squeak when a coal-box landed between the front legs of the gun tripod, but failed to explode. Although flung into the air, the gun wasn't damaged. The unerring convergence of sound bearing down on the spot where we stood gave us a split second warning, and we flung ourselves on the ground. Thank heavens it was a dud. Moving off some distance, we hastily constructed a new emplacement for the Vickers. The enemy shelling continued very close to our trench, and

finding an unoccupied dugout, we took possession. Dangerous though it was with only one entrance, we couldn't resist the shelter its overhead cover gave us. The risk was there, and we gambled that nothing would happen, but a coal-box struck the top of the dugout and the timber supports down below collapsed on three of the team. Two were dug free quickly, but Snowy, who had been stretched out, was pinned down by earth and corrugated iron, with just his face clear. Loose earth kept dropping as shells shook the ground, and in the dim and fast-fading light of an electric torch, it took two hours to get him free. Pressed down and helpless, Snowy was joking most of the time, and offering advice as to the best way to dig him out. He did not panic or get excited, and calmly waited while we worked. An officer was present, and witnessed this example of cool courage. Sometime later Snowy was awarded the Military Medal, the first in the 37th Machine Gun Company.

On 3rd July the Queen's and the Royal West Kents attacked the German lines from our sector. Crossing the corpse-strewn No Man's Land towards the black enemy wire, draped with dead Tommies, they met fierce machine gun fire, and were completely repulsed. Many walking wounded who got back filtered down our trench towards Aveluy Wood. I remember one youngster asking me to bandage him up. His right wrist had been struck by a large piece of shrapnel, and the hand was hanging by a few sinews. The initial shock must have stifled the pain, and he was almost cheery. 'I've got a Blighty at last,' he said. Like all of us, his desire to get out of it all and live was so strong that the loss of his hand was of secondary importance. I bandaged another chap whose arm, when in a horizontal position, had been hit by a bullet which shattered the whole forearm from wrist to elbow. The flesh was literally hanging in tatters. My first-aid effort, I'm afraid, was nothing more than parcelling up the pieces. The terrible injury caused by this one bullet made us wonder if Jerry was using dum-dum bullets. Later on, we found several chips of German soft-nosed bullets, and, as opportunity offered, experienced grim satisfaction in shooting them back with Mauser rifles. Such action was pro-

bably against international conventions, but we knew nothing about such things. We did know that Jerry was using saw-edge bayonets, flame-throwers and poison gas when it suited him. Simple justice demanded that whatever he used against us was meet and proper for him to get back.

News spread that Contalmaison, a village about five kilometres south, had been captured. None of us went into raptures over this information, as the 12th Division had not yet made a breach in the enemy line. All praise to the troops who captured the village, but what is a village in a battle area? A pile of bricks and rubble, with a fearful stench of death—not much to show for the terrible price paid.

The weather continued very hot. In fact it was a glorious summer that year. Water was severely rationed. Gruesome and distasteful though it was, we augmented our supplies from the dead. Looking at it today, it seems pretty low-down to plunder dead men's belongings, but needs must, and we soon got over the guilty feeling. A good tin of bully in a dead man's pack can't help him, nor can a packet of cigarettes. Many a good smoke came our way in this manner. In spite of fears and privations, life was still sweet provided we had a smoke.

Relief came on 9th July, and once clear of Aveluy Wood and down Coniston Steps our spirits rose. Exhausted, filthy and crawling with lice, we tramped through Albert and beyond to a village called Warloy. The order to polish buttons and brass as well as boots set off a spate of the foulest language. We felt tricked over the polishing business, and were not in the mood for calculated goading of that kind. Jerry had given us all the goading we wanted. Yet, there it was, it had to be done, and the Lord help those who didn't do it properly. And so we swore like hell and polished our buttons. At Vauchelles les Authie General Scott inspected our company, and congratulated us on our behaviour in the trenches. By way of a change, it would have been appropriate if he had seen us at the time of leaving the line, instead of through the rosy-tinted glasses of spit and polish. But generals don't work that way.

Twice during the next ten days we were alerted and marched

back to Albert for return to the line, but the alarms subsided, and we finished our rest. The great battle was still raging, and small gains were made at various parts of the line. On 25th July we took over trenches near Ovillers, which had just been captured by the Australians. We mounted the Vickers in the old German front line of 1st July, the exact part that we had faced from our position in front of Aveluy Wood. Our dead were still hanging on the wire, but were shortly removed and buried. It was staggering to see the high standard of the trenches that the Jerry front-line troops had used. We envied the skill and industry used in constructing such comfortable yet powerful defences. Some of the dugouts were thirty feet deep, with as many as sixteen bunk-beds, as well as door bells, water tanks with taps, and cupboards and mirrors. Apart from the personal comfort enjoyed by the Germans in them, the deep dugouts had withstood everything that our heavy artillery had flung at them. When our hearts had leapt at the seemingly devastating bombardment of those trenches, and had imagined Jerries were being smashed to bits, they were in all probability playing cards or carousing. In the dugout we occupied we found several packs of cards, and every corner was full of empty wine and beer bottles. Leaving aside such things as personal courage and endurance, it seemed as if we were a lot of amateurs when compared with the professional thoroughness of the Germans. It certainly wasn't the fault of the British Tommy that he had to put up with scratch holes, instead of decent dugouts. If he had been given the materials and proper instruction, not only would he have had a better life, but thousands of lives would have been saved.

The whole conduct of our trench warfare seemed to be based on the concept that we, the British, were not stopping in the trenches for long, but were tarrying awhile on the way to Berlin and that very soon we would be chasing Jerry across country. The result, in the long term, meant that we lived a mean and impoverished sort of existence in lousy scratch holes.

In the early days of August, things were a little quieter in the La Boisselle—Ovillers area. After a month of bitter fighting,

both sides were consolidating their positions. I was a Number One gunner then, and Nobby Clark was my Number Two. Nobby was a good deal older than I was, thirty perhaps, steadfast, and very strong. I was conscious of my new responsibility and felt gratified that I had been picked for the job. It was up to me to put all I knew into keeping the Vickers in fighting trim.

The weather was still fine, and there were magic moments during quiet spells, when grub was cooking on a fire, and someone vamped on a mouth organ. We'd lift our voices and go through the whole of our repertoire, which usually included the following:

*There was once a gay Cavallero,
Who dwelt on the banks of Navero,
Flashing about with his wonderful,
Wonderful, to-ra-la, to-ra-li-ay.*

Many bawdy verses follow, and tell of the sticky end of that gallant gentleman.

Revolver practice was a favourite pastime if there was any spare ammo about. A rifle cartridge pressed deep into a sandbag until just the rim was visible made a target as big as a sixpence. You stood thirty feet back with revolver cocked. If you made a hit, you blew a nice-sized hole in the sandbag, and raised a cheer. Three hits out of five shots was considered good. An enjoyable prank of Snowy's and mine was testing the resistance of the steel helmets that lay scattered about by wielding a pick and bringing it down on one full force. Snowy's forestry-trained biceps were pretty good at it. A good British helmet yielded only a moderate dent, but a dud would burst open down to the shaft of the pick handle. We couldn't very well experiment on our own helmets, in case they should turn out to be duds. Clearly, some cunning war contractor had been cheating and a War Office check hadn't been properly carried out. The duds were obviously of little use against shrapnel, and it is reasonable to assume that men had lost their lives

wearing them. Our crude testing proved that German helmets were less resistant than our good ones, as we could always knock a hole in them. Collecting military badges from the dead was indulged in by many Tommies. I wore a broad leather belt that was covered with them, and I regret that I parted with it for five francs. Today, such a belt might fetch a tidy sum in a London sale room.

Ghoulis curiosity drove me to turn over Jerry corpses for souvenirs, and I got a couple of watches and a Luger pistol. One of the watches had a natty bell alarm, something quite new to us. It came in useful for ringing the night hours to mark the changing of the gun reliefs. Looking through the contents of pocket wallets on dead Jerries, I felt a certain sympathy when scanning photographs of relatives. They looked ordinary civilised human beings to my young eyes, although they belonged, part and parcel, to the enemy. There were wives and children, parents, old chaps with big whiskers, nearly all dressed in black, as if attending a funeral. Respectable, clean and tidy was the general impression. But I remember one photo that gave me a bit of a shock. The picture showed a row of a dozen Jerry soldiers with their backs to the camera, sitting on a long latrine pole above a pit. Each man had his shirt pulled up, exposing his backside and genitals. All wore big grins as they looked round over their shoulders and, as if to crown the ugly sight, the *pickelhaubes* on their heads made them look a leering bunch of devils engaged on some hellish prank. I looked at the corpse beside me and, recognising that it bore a strong resemblance to one of the group, I wondered what had happened to the rest. If that was typical German humour, then, war or no war, Tommies were a lot of angels by comparison I thought. As one of my pals, a man of few words, said, 'There's no doubt about it, they're a dirty lot of bastards'. For a day or two we led an easy life, reclining on bunk-beds and gaming at cards for love. We had no money.

On 12th August my team was told off for barrage fire, to assist the Aussies' attack on Thiepval. The position of my gun would enable its fire to enfilade the ground between the new

German front line and support trenches, at a point where the attack was to be made that night. Sixteen thousand rounds had to be fired, and the team were kept busy fetching ammo and generally making ready. Clinometer calculations were made by an officer, and at early dusk Nobby and I crept out to a shell hole at the back of the parados and mounted the gun, to which we had fitted a new barrel.

It was quiet just before zero and then, suddenly, the sky was ablaze, as if by continuous flash lightning. The thunderous roar of our artillery reached us on the instant as the screaming shells sped towards the target. The bombardment blasted Jerry's front line and later developed into a creeping barrage on his support trenches. At zero plus fifteen minutes I opened fire and, with the aid of a shaded light and two pre-set pegs, kept the fire in its correct elevation and scope of traverse. The gun whipped through the first belt in less than half a minute. I reloaded, gave the gun a check-up, and continued the process. In the meantime, Number Three was crawling to and fro, building up the supply of ammo. The rest of the team were in the dugout, filling the empty belts by a hand-operated machine. Periodically, fresh water was added to the cooling jacket, and a touch of oil was applied to the sensitive parts of the gun with a brush kept in one of the grip handles. Although it was dark, we could see and feel what we were doing without difficulty. The ammo, British cordite type, gave little trouble. Now and then a stoppage occurred, but the position of the crank handle quickly indicated the necessary clearance action. Things were going nicely, the bombardment had eased off, and I wondered how the attack had fared. I knew there was a chance of success, as Jerry, already driven from the powerful front line, now had to fight in weaker support trenches behind flimsy wire.

Various signal flares lit the sky but were of no significance to us, as our firing had to continue until stand-to. Our job was to assist in pinning the enemy down in his support trenches, and to harass any reinforcements coming forward. There was also a sunken road likely to be used, which had to receive our attention. I kept up the fire, and, as expected, a whizz-bang

battery began to search for us. Clark and I were apprehensive, although not exactly displeased, as we guessed our fire was damaging in some way. If the German infantry asked for assistance from their light artillery, it was on the cards we were causing mischief. The first whizz-bang landed about twenty yards to the right. The range was bang-on, and a little adjustment in direction was all Jerry needed. The shells came nearer, some a few yards to the left. One hit two yards in front, showering us with dirt and fumes. It looked as if any minute, time would stop, so far as we were concerned. My stomach rolled in a funk, and I know Clark felt the same. Keeping the gun going was the surest antidote to our rising fears, and that we did. Nobody came and said, 'Pack it up', so we stuck it out and carried on. We finished our quota of rounds in four and a half hours, so our firing was more or less continuous.

Whizz-bangs were a torment to us. They travelled faster than sound. If you happened to be near the receiving end, you first heard the thing burst, then the whizz of its approach and lastly the boom of the gun that fired it. There was no split-second warning to get one's self-preservation instincts to work, as was the case with howitzer shells, which had higher trajectories and less speed.

I must mention here that Captain Graves in *Goodbye to All That* refers to machine gun crews indiscriminately firing off belt after belt to boil their water. This suggests that machine gunners who fancied a cup of tea or a shave simply fired off a couple of belts. In fact, this was not the case, as tea laced with mineral oil would be pretty ghastly. Also machine gun crews who fired 'indiscriminately' might well be engaged on barrage fire, and infantry officers would not necessarily be aware of that fact.

Captain Anderson told my team that the Australian GOC had sent a 'Thank you very much' telegram for our work in assisting his men on the night of 12th August. It was a most encouraging message for us. Bearing in mind that the General would get his knowledge first hand from his own troops, it proved that although we could not actually see our target, we

had taken an effective part in the attack. Relief came on the 13th, and at night the company bivouaced in a field near Albert. A storm arose, and we were washed out, water running over the ground as we lay on ground sheets. It was rumoured that the King would review the 37th Brigade, but he must have been told of the soaking and the review was put off.

We marched through Léavillers, Bus and Halloy by easy stages, and on the 17th we fetched up at Grand Rullecourt. General Scott presented medal ribbons to a number of officers and men, and Snowy Hankin got his Military Medal. Captain Anderson and Lieutenant Hudson received their Military Cross ribbons. The latter officer was a very daring man, dedicating himself to all sorts of private schemes for strafing Jerry. At night, he spent most of his time prowling about in No Man's Land. On one occasion he wanted to take a Vickers and three men on a raid with their pockets loaded with Mills bombs. How they were to get the gun into action, and for what purpose, was never made clear. The scheme wasn't approved. I'm sure Mr Hudson was disappointed, as he was such a restless man of action. But he took too many risks, and none of us was surprised when he was killed shortly after getting his Military Cross.

The company moved to Arras, and slept in the vaults honey-combed beneath the town. The old Spanish-looking façade of the square was in a mess, and the cathedral was a pile of rubble. The square, or Barbed Wire Square as the troops called it, was indeed a mass of wire and shell holes. The town hall at one end of the square was a shambles.¹

¹In 1958, the touring bus stopped at Arras, and the driver gave me ten minutes to find the square. I found a masterpiece of French restoration work. Everything was comparatively new, and yet bore the stamp of age, looking as if peace had reigned there since medieval times.

22 | Whizz-bang Villa

The company took over machine gun posts on 21st August near Rivière, ten kilometres south-west of Arras and opposite Blairville, which hugged the German front line. Snowy's gun and mine were near each other, on the edge of an orchard about a hundred yards from Jerry. To our pleasant surprise, a number of fruit trees were still standing and bearing fruit, but they were in full view of the enemy. Damsons, plums and apples tempted us, as well as a few cordon pears. Our mouths watered at the thought of getting some of the fruit, but how? It had to be done in darkness, as daylight scrumping was out. Jerry no doubt read our minds, and like a son-of-a-bitch belted through the trees as soon as it was dark, repeating the dose every half hour. Like the fox after the grapes, the fruit worried us. The machine gun fire eased off about 2 am, and we quietly got busy. We gorged like school kids, having almost forgotten what fresh fruit tasted like. After two or three nights of this waiting game we began to think it was easy, but one night I was caught in a tree red-handed. Jerry put up a flare, and pasted through the orchard. The hail of bullets tore the branches and leaves like a scimitar. I was a sitting duck all right, but none of the bullets was meant for me. The sensation I endured up that tree is beyond my powers of description. We were all bloody idiots, and dead lucky not to suffer casualties.

The orchard screened a little villa with its roof knocked off, though in happier days it was no doubt a charming home for somebody. 'Whizz-Bang Villa' was chalked in giant letters on one of the walls. Those of us not on gun duty crawled through the orchard to sleep on beds in the three bedrooms. The ground floor was covered with large black and white tiles, and provided quite a good game of shuffle board. It was a luxury to walk on a fine solid floor, instead of continually standing on dirt. A good kitchen gave us the chance to knock up a tasty feed, but we had to be careful about the smoke. The lads gave me full marks when I produced three big rissoles per man, made of bully and potatoes fried in swimming bacon fat. Real good they

were. Stewed fruit was on the menu every day. This domesticity and housekeeping lark was rudely shattered every now and again when machine gun bullets struck the walls, making us scuttle like rabbits into the cellar.

The brigade occupied that part of the line until 26th September. No attacks were made by either side and except for a few bust-ups it was reasonably quiet. I found a box of rifle-grenades, and Snowy and I engaged in a bit of pin-pricking with them. Neither of us had been on a course of instruction about grenades but we had ideas, and set to work to deliver them to Jerry. There were several ruined houses in Blairville close to the German front line, and men frequently hopped in and out of one particular house, which we suspected was being used as a cookhouse. The grenade resembled an elongated toffee-apple, with the case segmented for breaking up, shrapnel fashion. The rifle, loaded with a blank cartridge, was rested on the butt at a steep angle and the stick of the grenade placed in the muzzle. The removal of a pin freed a spinning vane which ensured that the grenade dropped nose-first. A calibrated quadrant attachment was used to obtain the range. After a few experiments we proceeded to deliver the goods, and spent a pleasant hour knocking the ruins of Blairville about—and Jerries too, we hoped.

Before leaving Rivière, some of us were pulled out of the line for a bombing course on the Mills bomb. I was fascinated by the neatness and power of that weapon, and when in the front line I usually had one in each trouser pocket. It felt good to know that a bomb that could probably kill an elephant was immediately available on my person, in case of a surprise attack.

Great rumblings of gunfire began to be heard, and on 28th September, after being relieved by the 41st Machine Gun Company, we boarded Paris buses. The brigade was on the move again. Taking a circuitous route via Doullens, we got off near Albert and awaited orders. A new phase of the Somme battle had just developed, and on 1st October we marched through Longueval to Delville Wood, the scene of terrible fighting a few days earlier. The wood had been reduced to a

vast mass of tree stumps, and the shell-pocked ground was strewn with corpses. That night, Snowy's team and mine moved forward along a sunken road to strengthen the line at Gueudecourt. The road, banked on both sides, was full of British and German dead. In the darkness we kept stumbling over the bodies, and when I fell heavily on one it gave out a deep grunt. The sudden weight of my body had compressed the corpse, forcing gases through the throat. I had heard of such a thing before but was a bit sceptical. Somebody laughed, but I felt far from laughter as I struggled to get the tripod once more on my shoulders. The sunken road ran straight to the front line, and Jerry light artillery plastered it continuously. The whole terrain for miles around had been a battle ground for weeks. Trônes Wood nearby, and the villages of Montauban, Guillemont and Flers lay flat. Our big camouflaged guns were in the rolling valleys behind engaged in shelling Bapaume, a fair-sized town behind the German lines.

Stand-to was on when we slithered into the shallow front line trench, there being no communicating approach trench. The Jerry shell-fire was so intense that an attack appeared imminent. The 6th Buffs were holding the line, and stretcher-bearers were giving first aid to the wounded lying in the trench. I mounted the Vickers, loaded it and with some anxiety awaited developments. No Man's Land was no more than 120 yards across, and a sudden rush by the enemy would have brought them on top of us in less than half a minute. Presently an infantry officer hurried by and said that an attack on our line had started a little to the left. The enemy shelling suddenly stopped, an ominous warning. Without further ado I opened fire to discourage the development of any attack in front. In the darkness it was useless to wait until Jerry was on top of us. Snowy on my right quickly followed suit, and together we raked across No Man's Land good and proper, snuffing out any attempt by the enemy to get started. Bombing was going on 50 yards to the left, but the Buffs held their ground and the attack failed. At frequent intervals during the night our two guns belted out, and gradually it seemed that we had got the

upper hand. Without the Vickers Jerry could have walked into our trench, as the infantry had suffered severe casualties.

Dawn came, and we were able to get our bearings. Behind the enemy front line there rose a long low hill, and the tallest buildings in Bapaume showed above the brow, sharply defined against the bright light from the east. A shout went up, and there, silhouetted in full view, were two German waggons drawn by pairs of horses. They were trying to make a get-away but had left it too late, a mistake Jerry frequently made.

I opened fire at a range of 400 yards, and the infantry joined in. Both waggons were quickly brought to a standstill. It was an unexpected bonus, but there was genuine regret about the animals.

Three days in that place exhausted us, as we had very little sleep, taken in odd snatches in an old German artillery dugout to the rear of the trench. I well remember Snowy fainting in that dugout, and it was some time before he recovered. Exhaustion had no doubt caused it, but at the time it shook me. I feared that he might lose some of the superb control he always showed, no matter how hard the conditions. He soon got over the slight set-back and became his old self. I think the incident worried me more than it did him. Two gun teams of 'A' Section relieved us on the fourth night, taking over our guns and ammo. As usual in such cases, I had an itemised receipt list ready for my opposite Number One to sign, showing that he had received the gun and stores.

The enemy shrapnel was hellish as we trudged back along the dreaded sunken road to the support lines near Delville Wood. When about to flop down with my companions to rest, I discovered that I had lost my revolver. Recollecting that I had felt something hit my foot a few yards before entering the sunken road, I informed an officer about the loss. He left it to me to decide whether I went back or not, at the same time mentioning seven pounds as the likely sum I might be called upon to pay, failing recovery of the weapon. Bearing in mind that the whole battle area was littered with war material worth millions of quid, and that there was no apparent urgency to

salvage it, the officer's observation was a bit thick, to say the least. However, with the possibility of a distasteful enquiry in the offing, plus my boyish fears that ignominy attached to such a loss, like a mug I went back.

I soon found that being alone on the journey down the sunken road was very different from being with my pals. Courage is communicable from one to another. In company, the dangers are shared, but when alone, amid darkness and the dead, there is no sharing. The further I stumbled along the road the more windy I became. There was some moonlight, and although it helped me to pick my way, it more clearly showed the piles of dead. My worst fear was being killed without a pal knowing about it. A pal would recover my pay book and, if he was sensible, pocket any cigarettes I had left and write a letter of condolence to my next-of-kin, shown in the paybook as my mother. Perhaps he would find time to fix up a cross made of two bits of wood from an ammo box, and scrawl my name in indelible pencil on it the same as I had seen hundreds of names on similar crosses from time to time. I remembered a cross I had seen somewhere near Fosse 8, on which the words read 'Captain F. Bowes Lyons, Black Watch, 4th son of the Earl of Strathmore'.

Such fearsome thoughts were with me as I staggered towards the end of the sunken road, where the shrapnel bursts seemed to concentrate. One approaching shell burst twenty feet in front of me, about ten feet from the ground. As a hail of balls and fragments spattered the ground, I fell down, and for a moment I thought it was all over. Picking myself up, I ran like hell to get out of the road. Calculating the spot where I thought I had lost my revolver, I dropped on all fours and commenced crawling, feeling over the ground with both hands. Systematically I covered many square yards, up and down, up and down, convinced every minute that I was on a hopeless task, and that I was a prize idiot. My hand touched a piece of cord, and I knew instantly the revolver was attached to the other end of it. The cord was the lanyard, which in some inexplicable way had broken. What did it matter how it had happened, or how

the thing had tipped out of its holster, now that I had it firmly in my grasp?

On the way back I avoided the sunken road and struck across country. I strayed too far to the right and got lost, but some stretcher-bearers put me right and I found our support trench. Except for the sentries, the company was asleep. I had been away for four hours.

For three days we enjoyed comparative rest and quiet. Coal-boxes kept roaring overhead to Death Valley behind Delville Wood, searching for our heavy batteries, but we ignored them so long as they passed over at a good altitude. Near what remained of Flers was one of the first two tanks used in the war. Snowy and I put in a thorough inspection, marvelling at its apparent strength and formidable appearance. There it lay, knocked about by whizz-bangs, but its armament of four Vickers guns seemed to be in good condition. I will never understand what possessed our command to disclose that startling and revolutionary weapon to the Germans, in such a puny thrust. It was not until fourteen months later that our tanks made an appearance in great strength. The premature disclosure at Flers politely told the German High Command that the Allies were thinking in terms of tanks as a means of breaking through.

A German Taube airplane came in low over our trench, and the pilot leaned over and dropped a twenty-pound bomb, which failed to explode. Turning back to see what had happened, he was met by a long burst of fire from one of our guns, which had a tracer bullet in every fourth pocket of the belt. Tracer bullets were a new thing, and it was fascinating to watch their speed through the air. On this occasion the tracers seemed to be hitting the engine of the plane, as their thin smoke was whirled around by the propellers. The machine veered off in the direction of the front line, descending as it went. If the pilot made a safe landing in friendly territory he was a lucky man.

We went back to the front line again at Gueudecourt on 7th October. The sunken road was still under heavy shrapnel fire,

and the officer in charge took us across country to avoid it. The front trench had been pounded for days, and the Buffs had suffered many casualties. 'A' Section's four guns held the line for two days to ease the strain on the Buffs. The whizz-bangs were unbearable, and several of our gunners became casualties. Jock Tait, a big Scot in my team, was struck plumb in the centre of the forehead by a shrapnel ball. The hole was bigger than a sixpence, and perfectly round. Owing to the events which followed, I'm afraid that I don't know whether he survived. I would be most happy to learn that he did.

We were relieved after dark on the 10th and, loaded like pack mules, slogged it back to Death Valley, where huts constructed of sandbags with tin roofs had been erected for the troops to rest in. We had a good deal of freedom, and Snowy and I meandered about enjoying life, thankful that we had so far been spared. We sometimes felt a little small when we watched the big guns do their stuff and compared them with the Vickers. Yet we knew that under certain conditions the Vickers was the more deadly. The story of David and Goliath had a special appeal for us. In those far off days, although still only kids, dealing out death was our business. Our homeland desired it, and had trained us for that very purpose. Whatever the rights or wrongs of the war, and we didn't know much about that, we were in it up to our necks for better or worse. As I mentioned earlier, it was about this time that I saw HRH the Prince of Wales in Happy Valley.

23 | My number was on it

And now I come to a totally unexpected turning-point in my story, one of those things you could bank on never happening but which do. It was nearly 2 am on 17th October and we were about to parade for revolver inspection before returning to the line at Gueudecourt. A whistle blew, and as 'A' Section moved out of the hut for parade, I was shot through the left foot by a

·45 bullet from Snowy's revolver. The bullet tore between two bones in front of the ankle, went out through the instep of my boot and buried itself in the ground. With his revolver pointed down, and not realising that it was loaded, Snowy had casually pulled the trigger and wham! I was out of the fighting for six months. There was pandemonium for a few moments as I hobbled about in pain, and then I found myself on the back of a comrade named Grigg, who carried me to a field dressing station close by. Poor Snowy was put under open arrest pending an enquiry. I'll never forget how at first I was in an acute state of alarm at the unorthodox manner in which I had become a casualty. After many months of shot and shell from the enemy, with every missile carrying possible death or mutilation, it was shattering to find myself *hors de combat* through the unwitting agency of my best pal.

That evening, with other wounded men, I travelled in a very ancient charabanc past the ruins of Montauban and Longueval, right out of the battle area. The further I went, the more my spirits rose, as it gradually dawned on me that I was surely the luckiest Tommy in the whole of France. My hopes soared at the prospect of getting to Blighty, and I felt immense relief as I moved from the danger zone.

Transferred to an ambulance car, I became puzzled to find myself the only casualty in it. Finally I arrived at the 39th Casualty Clearing Station. Next morning I discovered that there was something queer about the place which filled me with misgivings. None of the nursing staff appeared friendly, and the matron looked, and was, a positive battle-axe. I made anxious enquiries, and quickly learned that I was classed as a suspected self-inflicted-wound case. Unknown to me, the letters SIW with a query mark added had been written on the label attached to my chest. Here was a fine kettle of fish, and I was in a state of near-panic. The place was full of SIW cases, or suspected cases, and normal standards of kindness were not allowed to nurture there. Many cases of wounding, even blindness, had been caused by foolish curiosity or needless tampering with detonators, fuses, rusted-up bombs and other weapons

away from the trenches. That alone cast dark suspicion on the unlucky victim, who, by carelessness, as opposed to a genuine accident, fell into the fearful SIW category. Whenever it was possible for a patient to do any kind of chore, he was set to work. If he had lost a foot, he could brood over his misfortune while peeling spuds, or any other task that he was able to do without the aid of two feet.

One man told me that he had been tampering with what he thought was a dud bomb, and had lost his right hand. Of course, there were patients who had deliberately injured themselves in order to avoid further fighting. These were the blackest among those black sheep. The poor devils must have been in a dreadful state of mind to savage themselves, but I doubt whether severe mental stress was taken into account when pleading for mercy at the courts martial, which awaited them all.

In every unit there were always one or two men who were below standard, unable to control or hide their fears in times of danger. To be blunt, they ought not to have been soldiers at all, yet they volunteered for service. Events, however, proved too much for them, and they were to be pitied.

Three most anxious days passed. A report about me was received at last, and I was given clearance, thus ending the most unpleasant of my war experiences. All smiles again, and with my foot not troubling me unduly, I travelled to Rouen, where I was earmarked for Blighty. On 23rd October I was aboard the hospital ship WESTERN AUSTRALIA. The wooded banks of the Seine were in a blaze of autumn colour as we set out on the eight-hour journey down to Le Havre. Everything was so peaceful and quiet that it seemed to belong to another world. It was a happy trip, with sing-songs and good eating.

Today's my daughter's wedding day. Hooray!
Fifty thousand pounds I'll give away. Hooray!

I was amazed to get two bottles of Guinness to drink. At Southampton, a crowd of uniformed angels hovered around with

lashings of sandwiches, drinks and cigarettes. It is not easy to find the right words to describe my feelings then. I leave it to the reader to imagine.

24 | Blighty

There was a delay at Southampton while the wounded were sorted out for various hospitals. The aim seemed to be to send patients as far from their homes as possible. My home was in Croydon, but I was packed off to Bridgenorth Hospital, Shropshire. Scotsmen were almost certain to drop anchor in the south, and so on. Maybe it was to discourage or reduce travel by relatives, as railways were the only means of long-distance travel then. Would it not have been better and wiser to send men to hospitals as near as possible to their homes, to save relatives a lot of expense and the railways an unnecessary burden?

However, I have nothing but the happiest of memories of Bridgenorth Hospital. I secretly fell in love with most of the nurses—they looked so beautiful—but I was a bit too shy then, my social contact with girls before the war being almost nil. It was a wonderful thing being a wounded Tommy, and I lapped up the attentions of the visitors like a young puppy. The personal feeling of health and cleanliness, and the good food, was sheer luxury to men who had almost forgotten what civilisation was like.

And so to Hereford, to finish my convalescence at a private hospital, where a Lady Butler reigned like a queen of matrons. She was tall, dark and handsome, and invariably dressed in a scarlet silk habit, obviously of her own personal choice. She looked like a female cardinal, and the rustle of her dress gave considerable warning of her approach. She was no battle-axe, but a very gracious person, and she more than fulfilled the preconceived notions I had as to what a titled lady should look like and how she should behave. I was dead lucky to have struck

that hospital. I'll never forget the food and perquisites we Tommies had there. Her Ladyship personally issued the daily ration of twenty cigarettes or an ounce of pipe tobacco per man. On my 19th birthday, I had a surprise birthday cake.

The best Hereford people vied with each other to entertain us. I remember one wonderful tea in the home of the Bulmers, the famous cider family. On another occasion some of us took tea in a big country mansion where there was a bowling green, and our instructor in the game was Admiral Sir Reginald Tyrwhitt-Wilson, a famous sailor of the time. Once I had cast away my crutches, rides in grand old motor cars were mine for the asking. Theatres, whist drives, concerts, bun-fights—we had the lot.

The fractures in my foot mended, the bullet hole disappeared, and within four months I was able to walk about as if nothing had happened. Lady Butler kept her boys as long as she could, but an RAMC doctor made frequent visits, and at last she had to sign me off. It was a sad day for me when I left Hereford.

25 | A.1 again

The party was now over, and after some sick leave I reported to Harrowby Camp, Grantham, on the estate of Lord Brownlow. The camp was the principal training base of the Machine Gun Corps. In a matter of hours, the memory of the soft time in hospital was purged from me into a half-forgotten dream. Stiff training was started at once, with spit and polish, guard duties, fatigues and what not thrown in. After the cushy time in hospital we soon had good cause to moan and groan. Our particular bane was a bunch of fire-eating instructors from the Guards, none of whom had actual fighting knowledge—they were mere parade-ground tyrants. We ex-wounded types were quickly told to forget any experience acquired in France, as it counted for nothing at Harrowby. One of the instructors warned us,

'Any bloody lip from any of yer and I'll whip him straight off to the guard room'. 'Oh, what a bastard,' I said under my breath, and the bloke next to me croaked, 'By Christ, if ever I meet that bastard in France, I'll blow his bloody guts out'. Our ranks seethed with rage. Even I, young as I was, regarded myself as an old soldier, a fighting soldier, and entitled to some slight recognition of the fact. Such calculated and insufferable insolence—it was nothing less—was hard to bear, and it was not only our particular bully who was chucking his weight about; they were all at it. I must have been growing fast, I was that bloody mad.

There was no escape, and fitness was literally lashed into us, but our indignation remained. Every week names were called for overseas drafts, meaning goodbye to pints in Grantham on Friday nights, fish and chips, and feeds in church institutes with nice girls to serve us. I was on a draft sooner than I expected, and within a few days arrived at Folkestone, mighty glad to get away from that bunch of blow-hards at Harrowby. It was 9th April 1917, but I didn't know that the battle of Arras had just commenced, with ice and snow on the ground. Rough weather prevented us from sailing, but on the 17th I arrived at Camiers, a reception base for drafts. The days passed with training at full blast, including passing through the gas hut a few times. Very soon, records showed that seven men were earmarked for a draft to the 12th Division, and I was among them. On the day for entraining, the RSM called out the names of each senior NCO destined for a particular division, who then stepped forward and took charge of his draft. When he came to the 12th Division draft list, the RSM yelled out, 'Private Coppard, step forward ten paces, turn and face your men'. In a daze, I did as I was told, and then learned that as there were no NCOs for the 12th Division, the senior private would take charge. And so it fell to me to draw a blanket and three days' rations for myself and six men. None of the six had been overseas before. When I got used to the idea, I felt a bit cocky. I was psychologically superior to the six, but without a stripe to back it up.

The rations were placed in a box, and I knew they would

have to be watched. One of my draft was a trouble-maker, a good ten years older than I was, a hungry-gutted type. When we boarded the train he demanded his whack of rations, although the others were content to let them stay in the box. He made it plain that he trusted nobody. At first I refused his demand, but the blighter kept up his pestiferous and anti-social nagging. In the end I succumbed, and doled out the rations equally between the lot of us. The journey was long-winded, broken by stops at various camps. On the third day, the trouble-maker was rationless, and begging for a crust. 'You've bloody well had it mate,' I said, but good-natured mugs that we were, we each gave him a bit of this and that to see him through.

Leaving the train at Frévent, we marched to the 6th Corps reinforcement camp, and joined the 12th Division reserve battalion, thus ending my brief taste of petty authority. I was very pleased to learn that I was to return to the 37th Machine Gun Company. For several days all available troops were employed in digging trenches round the camp, presumably for defence in case of a German break-through, though more likely this was a subterfuge to keep our minds and muscles occupied. Suddenly the 12th Division draft moved off and arrived in the stricken city of Arras. The sixteenth-century town hall in Barbed Wire Square was a heap of stones.

26 | I rejoin the 37th Machine Gun Company

I was the sole reinforcement for my old company, and a guide took me to rear HQ. Jerry shells were crumping down in parts of the city when I reported my arrival. It was 8th May 1917, and the British attack to clear the enemy from the environs of Arras had ground to a halt a few kilometres east along the Cambrai road. During my absence in Blighty there had been a change in the company command. Captain Anderson was

divisional CO in charge of machine gun companies, with the rank of major. The strange faces at HQ made me a little upset, but before I had time to turn round I was on my way to the reserve trenches at Feuchy, where I joined some of my old companions in 'A' Section. I was happy to be with them again, and they plied me with countless questions about the old homeland. They were naturally envious of my good fortune in having six months' freedom from danger and misery, but there was no mistaking the warmth of their welcome. They had suffered a hard winter and were battle-weary.

Two of my old pals had been killed, Armstrong and Marshall. The latter had vanished from the scene, and nobody knew what had happened to him. It was presumed he had been buried by shell fire, a fate suffered by many Tommies. Soon I met Snowy Hankin, promoted to full corporal; he never mentioned the accident in which we were so closely involved. I gathered he was a bit touchy on the subject, and I was glad enough to let sleeping dogs lie. Very few of 'A' Section had been on leave to Blighty. They all had an intense longing for leave, and I know some feared that death might cheat them. I also learned with much regret that Lieutenant Clarke, the first commander of my old platoon in the Queen's, had been killed.

My diary for 9th May reads, 'Very fine day and plenty of air fights'. The air power of both the Germans and the Allies had increased considerably, and anti-aircraft gunnery was a permanent feature of the war scene. I was soon posted to a gun team, and went up the line to supplement another gun team on the right bank of the Scarpe canal. The Battle of Arras was still going on, and a show was working up to capture ground near Roeux. On the 12th, our artillery put up a fierce bombardment, and our two guns joined in with barrage fire across the canal on Jerry's support area. The 37th Brigade attacked, and later a big party of Jerries, carrying no visible arms, swarmed down the other side of the canal. Suddenly they saw us, and up shot their hands. Our guns were trained on them, and it was touch and go whether to open fire, but they were too far from

their own lines to get back if they had any trickery in mind similar to that perpetrated on 'B' Company of the Queen's in the Hohenzollern Redoubt. One or two of us favoured the extreme treatment, but Lieutenant W. D. Garbutt decided they should be taken prisoner. A big punt lay alongside, and the officer ordered the Jerries to cross over to our side, but they stood with their hands up and wouldn't budge. No doubt we looked a menacing lot, with two machine guns and a number of cocked revolvers. In the end a party of the Queen's rounded them up. Lieutenant Garbutt, a Yorkshireman I believe, was in charge of 'A' Section then. He was courageous, steady and companionable, and we thought a lot of him.

The 12th Division, which had been in the line since the start of the battle on 9th April, had a hard-earned rest due to it, so I was fortunate in rejoining my old unit at that time. Although I had been with the section only a few days I soon fell into the old routine. My sudden plunge into the fighting area again brought back that wind-up feeling under shell-fire, and it was not easy to control. The daily comradeship of my pals, whether in or out of the line, gave me strength. To most of us it was not a matter of patriotism any longer—that had burned itself out long ago. What remained was a silent bonding together of men who knew there was no other way out but to see the thing through. Deep down, too, was an implacable hatred of the Huns, for all the misery and death they had caused, and it would have been un-British not to want to settle the score with them.

We cleaned up in Arras, and then marched via Duisans to Montenescourt, where General Scott presented medal ribbons. I began to study the medal ribbons of the recipients. The French *Croix de Guerre* was much in evidence, and I saw one or two men with the Russian Order of St George. I was 19 years old then, and to get a medal of some sort was my highest ambition. There were medal-scoffers of course, who jeered about medals being sent up with the rations, but I'm sure that every man in his heart would have liked a medal, if only to relieve the monotony of the uniform.

The brigade got a lift in motor lorries to Avesne le Comte, and dispersed to neighbouring villages for billeting. Our company rested in the little village of Oppy and got down to cleaning and training right away. I was a Number One again, and after a week of intensive gun drill a competition was held. The officers put up some money, and my team won ten francs for speed in mounting the gun and knocking down a steel plate at 200 yards' range. Our time of 27 seconds gives some idea of the kind of drill Major Anderson was keen on. Two of my team had joined the company while I was in Blighty. One was Edwin Short and the other was Jock Hershell. Edwin was born in the Argentine, and came from there to enlist. His father was English and his mother Spanish. He had had a university education and spoke perfect English, and I never understood why he wasn't an officer. Like his name, he was short and tubby, and also looked a bit untidy, which got him into hot water quite a lot. But any man who travels over 6,000 miles to fight for his father's homeland is no ordinary man. Jock, of course, was a Scot, very broad and strong, and a splendid companion. We blew the ten francs that night, and at half a franc a bottle the wine reduced us to a maudlin condition.

27 | 12th Division sports

On 1st June, the second anniversary of our arrival in France, the company went on a long route march in light order, with sing-songs all the way. Next day company sports were held and, being no athlete, I entered the sack race for a lark. To my astonishment I won first prize, a ten franc voucher, exchangeable at the divisional canteen. Ivergny was the venue for the brigade sports and, fancying myself as a sack pedestrian, I decided to compete. The result was that I dead-heated with a chap in the Queen's, the first and second prizes being shared between us. Divisional sports soon followed at Grand Rullecourt and I just had to enter the sack race. In fact I was practi-

cally ordered to compete and was given permission to train with the real athletes, being excused all parades to do so. Fired by my previous successes, insignificant and comic though they were, I suppose it was the first time in my young life that I really set out to win something. My enthusiasm and improvement in performance caught the eye of officers and NCOs alike, and I was encouraged on all sides. Gradually I realised that these gentry also had an eye to business, for they saw a chance of winning a packet of money. Sports day arrived, and off we competitors went, packed in a limber behind a couple of mules. The sports were held in the grounds of a chateau, where the 36th Machine Gun Company kindly provided dinner. The sun shone, and a big crowd of Frenchies were present, as well as troops. There were also a number of bookies, dressed up like the real thing, complete with cigars, grey bowlers and money bags. How they got their impedimenta into France was a mystery. Obviously they were bookies in civvy street. They yelled the odds for the various events in real professional style, and ten to one was offered for all competitors in the sack race. A good deal of cash was placed on me, and the bookies smelt a rat. Down came the price, but all the same they were well caned when I romped home by a clear twenty yards.

I couldn't go wrong that day. Officers and NCOs patted me on the back as they handed me more beer than I could drink.

In a thicket away from the general view were a number of casks of beer, around which was a swarm of NCOs. Sir Julian Byng, the new commander of the 3rd Army, was present. Silver medals in the shape of the ace of spades were given to first-prize winners in all events, plus a ten franc voucher. So ended a happy day, long to be remembered.

28 | The Arras struggle

On 18th June the company marched in full kit to Gouy-en-Artois and the next day to Arras. We operated from Shamrock Corner, where we were in reserve, and from time to time odd jobs of carrying and maintenance fell to us. On several occasions I helped to repair the front-line wire, a nerve-racking job. Dreading bursts of machine gun fire, we worked in silence at top pressure until dawn crept up. We made many trips carrying boxes of small arms ammo up to the front line, a journey of over two miles. Each box contained 1,000 rounds of ammo. The last quarter of a mile under severe shell-fire was cruel, and I was drenched in sweat.

Occasionally we were allowed in Arras, where the open air swimming bath was a great attraction. The 'Spades' concert party ran a show in the city. A pretty soprano sang *Little Brown Bird* and *Roses in Picardy*. So sentimental was her rendering that she nearly had me in tears. Reserve duties ended, and 'A' Section took over a part of the Wancourt Line, on the right of the Arras-Cambrai road. Not far from us, on the left of the road at the top of a low hill, were the remains of Monchy le Preux, where the cavalry had been cut up in the early stages of the battle. My pals told me that the cavalry attack was a fiasco. It is impossible to understand the reason for throwing horse cavalry against machine guns skilfully emplaced behind a screen of barbed wire. If it was in the nature of an experiment or test to see what would happen, then whoever gave the order received a salutary lesson. The attack was a suicidal failure.

German shelling in the Wancourt area was the heaviest I had yet experienced. In addition to employing many howitzer batteries firing coal-boxes, Jerry was using a 17-inch howitzer which fired a shell weighing over a ton. The missile approached with a roar like an express train, and for a moment petrified us as it shot over our heads, before plunging on the outskirts of Monchy with a shattering explosion. I had a nasty shaking-up on 3rd July. Coal-boxes were coming over in fours, and on that fine summer evening we counted 180, all of them dropping

within a 200 yards radius of our position. There was no difficulty in picking them out in the clear evening sky just before the final drop, and it was maddening to try and forecast a positive threat to our little section of trench. Miraculously my team suffered no casualties, but the next evening poor Edwin was killed outright. When the shelling lulled a bit, three of us took him to a patch near Fosse Farm, and, I'm afraid, buried him in a great hurry, for the blasted Hun began dropping crumps almost on the place. 'Goodbye old pal' were the only words said. Two crossed sticks were stuck in the mound, and we hurried back to the front trench.

On 7th July my team crossed over the Cambrai road, took over a gun position close to Monchy, and was soon engaged in anti-aircraft duty. As the size of the German air force grew, so their pilots were getting bolder. It became common practice for them to strafe our infantry with machine guns, a menace that had to be countered.

Like the latest Allied aircraft at that time, some German machines were fitted with a mechanism that enabled the pilot to fire machine guns through the propellers with great accuracy.

For anti-aircraft work a circular pit was dug, and the Vickers was mounted on a post in the centre. This allowed a full circle of fire. Enemy airmen were quick to notice a blind spot directly above the gun, which would not operate at too steep an angle. A sharp lookout had to be kept, and provided one got in a good burst as an enemy aircraft approached, it would veer off at once or take refuge in the clouds. Once, a Boche plane sneaked up from behind, and from 200 feet up dropped a twenty-pound bomb, which only missed us by a few feet. As he sped off on a straight course, not a brilliant thing to do, I helped him on his way with a long burst, which included tracers. He crossed No Man's Land only a few feet up, and the infantry peppered him for all they were worth. There was a rumour in the company that if a gunner brought down an enemy plane, a reward of 500 francs and ten days' leave would be given. We heard nothing official about it, and I think it was just boloney. How

could a gunner prove a claim, when most of the infantry were having a bash too? After all, a single bullet in the right place might do the trick.

I got in a spot of bother one day when a fight between one of our planes and a Jerry was going on. To me, the Iron Cross marking was quite distinct on the enemy machine as it weaved in and out of the low clouds, and equally clear was the circular tricolour on the RFC plane. Both planes were shooting at each other and playing hide-and-seek, and I took a hand in the game by belting at Jerry whenever I spotted him. Suddenly our company CO appeared at my side and yelled, 'What the bloody hell do you think you are doing? You're shooting at a British machine. Consider yourself under open arrest.' But a few moments later we heard the noise of one of the planes, and there was Jerry, with the Iron Cross badge as black as the ace of spades. The CO stood beside me as I promptly gave the enemy plane a good burst before it could reach cloud cover again; and that was the last we saw of it. Very sportingly the CO said, 'That was a Jerry all right. Sorry,' and off he went.

At 5 am on 11th July the enemy made a strong attack on Long Trench on our left, and captured 150 yards of it. For three hours there was hand-to-hand fighting and bombing, but by 8 am the enemy was driven out, leaving many dead behind as well as prisoners. During the raid, in response to an SOS signal from our front line, I fired 1,500 rounds on the enemy's front line and support trenches, thus adding to the general hate that fine morning.

In the afternoon a fierce dog-fight took place overhead, when four Boche planes singled out one of ours and shot it down. It landed in No Man's Land in front of our gun position. To our surprise the airman got out and started to hobble towards us. To cover him, I plastered the enemy parapet in a broad sweeping traverse, and the airman managed to roll into a shell hole near a gap in our wire. Very soon a whizz-bang battery set about destroying the crippled plane, putting about fifty shells around it, and finally it burnt itself out. The wounded pilot wisely stayed in the shell hole, and he was brought in at dusk.

Patrouillen-Karte für Abschnitt - R 3 SÜD"



Patrol map of the la Vacquerie sector found by the author on a dead German. [Q71270]

I developed a nasty boil on the nape of my neck, and went to the first-aid post to get it lanced. There was no sticking plaster available and, owing to the awkward position of the boil, I was bandaged around the neck, jaws and forehead. It looked as if my head had been blown off. My afflicted appearance drew attention as I trudged back to the front line. One Tommy, no doubt thinking I was off my rocker as well as badly wounded, laid a restraining hand on my shoulder and said, 'Hey mate, aren't you going the wrong way?' I had a high temperature, and my head was rocking as I made my way back, when suddenly I ran into a party of staff officers accompanying Sir Julian Byng, GOC the Third Army, on a tour of inspection. I wondered if I was seeing things. When about to pass by me, the General, noticing my bandaged head, stopped and said to me, 'Are you wounded?' I replied, 'No sir'. 'Boils?' queried the General. 'Yes sir,' I said, hoping that he, in an expansive mood, would wave a hand and say, 'Send this boy down to reserve for a couple of days' rest.' I had no such luck. 'Beastly things. I've had them myself,' he said, and with that the General and his entourage moved on.

News passed round that Major Anderson had been killed. I was sad and surprised, as I had pictured him directing the operations of his machine gunners from a safe distance. I was wrong. If I had seriously considered the matter, I would have realised that Major Anderson not only gave orders, but was the type of officer who, when occasion demanded it, would want to see them carried out.

I feel I must mention a piece of psychological propaganda, put about by some War Office person, which brought poor comfort to Tommies. The story swept the world and, being gullible, we in the trenches were taken in by it for a while. With slight variations it indicated that the German war industry was in a bad way, and was short of fats for making glycerine. To overcome the shortage a vast secret factory had been erected in the Black Forest, to which the bodies of dead British soldiers were despatched. The bodies, wired together in bundles, were pitchforked on to conveyor belts and moved into the factory

for conversion into fats. War artists and cartoonists got busy, and dreadful scenes were depicted and published in Britain. The effect on me at first was one of morbid despondency. Death was not enough apparently. The idea of finishing up in a stew pot was bloody awful, but as I had so many immediate problems the story soon lost its evil potency for me. We called the Germans a lot of bloody bastards, but I think it safe to say that if the object of the story was to work the British troops into a state of fighting frenzy, then it was a complete and utter wash-out. Tommy was giving all he could, and no more was left, except his life. The reader who has not heard of this story before should know that the War Office individual responsible for this dirty bit of propaganda admitted some twenty years or more later that the whole thing was a pack of lies from start to finish.

'A' Section was relieved on 13th July and went back to Shamrock Corner. I well remember an old German notice-board at the side of the road. It read: *Zum Tilloy—Kronprinz Rupprecht Weg*. The notice intrigued us and we had fun in saying the words as gutturally as we could. 'Who is this bloke Rupprecht?' someone asked, but none of us really knew. It is of interest to note that this Crown Prince, eldest son of Louis III, King of Bavaria, was in command at that very time of several German armies, one of which was doing its best to wipe out the 12th Division at Monchy.

In our reserve capacity we became maids of all work again, humping, wiring, digging and so on, but I was suddenly whipped off to become guide and temporary batman to a newly-joined 2nd Lieutenant X. With a new stripe, for I was a fledgling unpaid lance-corporal, I took the young officer to a reserve trench close to the front line at Monchy. Enemy shelling provided a sticky reception, and we found shelter in the entrance of a collapsed dugout. Mr X was two or three years older than I was, but I felt responsible for teaching him the ways of trench life. In a matter of hours I realised to my alarm that he was mentally and physically incapable of making good. It was tough luck that his first taste of trench warfare was under such

heavy shell-fire. I searched around and found a deeper dugout, but once in, I couldn't get him out of it. Arguing, pleading, cajoling, almost threatening, made no difference; he wouldn't budge. The poor devil was paralysed with fear. Wounded men and stretcher-bearers took shelter on the steps of the dugout, which made matters worse for him. Not even the urge of nature would tempt him out of the place, and he did his business in the dugout. He lost his appetite, and wouldn't touch the tasty bits I fixed up for him. Once, when I went to fetch rations from the rear, I returned to find the dugout full of badly-wounded men, but the young officer had done nothing to help them. He kept me well supplied with cigarettes, but I was obliged to empty his slops. At times, to my embarrassment, he would burst into tears, and I felt that the situation was quite beyond me. I had to stick it for more than a week and was jolly glad when it was over. It wasn't long before the CO and his brother officers realised that they had a dud officer reinforcement, and within a month he reported sick with a blister on his heel. He never came back to the company, and I've often wondered what strings were pulled to get rid of him. At one time there was a chap in my gun team who suffered the same way, but he had to stick it, and he led a hell of a life. As he had an ungainly hump on his back and a cast in his eye, his appearance was rather repellent, and he had an appetite like a wolf. He was cursed with a physique that drew scorn upon him. Someone, referring to the hump, would yell out, 'Why don't you put that little bleeder down, and give him a walk?' That poor blighter had trouble all right, and all because nature had not endowed him with sufficient strength of character and will to overcome his physical defects.

On 2nd August a heavy concentration of shells rained down on a support trench north of Monchy where 'A' Section's guns were mounted. This was followed by mortar fire on the infantry in the front line. At 9.30 pm Jerry infantry attacked in mass, and our hard-pressed defenders sent up SOS signals. The section's four guns answered the call at once with barrage fire on the enemy support areas. My target was a wood called Bois du

Sart, where it was known enemy troops were concentrated. We maintained our fire for three hours, drawing on to ourselves a deluge of gas shells. Our new box-type respirators were efficient, but the discomfort was overpowering after an hour's use. All-clear signals shot up into the night sky and I tore off my mask. Word soon came that Jerry had been repulsed with heavy losses. From 6th to 12th August the company rested in tents at Beurains and were able to visit Arras in the evenings. Carousing was the best medicine for battle-weary soldiers. The wine acted quickly, but overshadowing our rest was the haunting thought of the next spell up the line. Every return to the trenches was a new battle for the individual Tommy. It mattered little to him what was going on at other parts of the front. His fight was chiefly against the fears within himself. A few days' rest was not enough to restore his morale. Just as he was beginning to feel some benefit, he was back in the front line again. The thunder of guns in the distance made him say, 'I pity those poor bleeders up there', but he still had his own worries to contend with. The magnitude of a great battle stirred his blood, but there were many long and lonely hours of sentry vigil at night, when, in his imaginings, phantasmagorical Jerries swarmed across No Man's Land in fearsome numbers.

My gun team and another took over a two-gun emplacement, with dugout, in Spade Trench on the 13th. The main entrance led down to a chamber, from which two shafts led up at an angle, giving access to the two guns, twenty feet apart at ground level. Although the chamber was no more than twelve feet deep, it had three possible exits. Heavy thunder storms occurred, putting a damper on things generally for a few days, and there was a distinct lull in the fighting. But on the 17th heavy shelling started again in our vicinity. Jock Hershell left the dugout during the shelling, and didn't return for a while. I became apprehensive and went along to a latrine sap where I thought he might be. I found him there, slumped in a heap, severely wounded. We carried him down in to the dugout, and at a glance I saw that his broad back had caught a blast of shrapnel. I cut his tunic and underclothes up the back with a

jack-knife and separated them. I winced at the sight. Jock's back was full of punctures, and blood bubbles were wheezing out of the holes as he breathed. Our hearts sank and we feared the worst. The back of his powerful upper arms hung in shreds. He appeared to be in no pain, though he was anxious, and kept asking the extent of the injuries he could not see. We lied like hell and gave him first aid, using nearly all our bandages and iodine in the process. 'You've got a Blighty one for sure,' I cried. It seemed hours before we got him away to a first-aid post, where we left him, knowing that we would never see him again. Strong as he was, he could not survive his terrible injuries, and he died at the first-aid post. Farewell once more to a brave and staunch comrade. In a small unit like a machine gun team, it was a deep and personal loss when a comrade was killed, and the bond of friendship broken for ever.

At that stage of the war in 1917 the build-up of German artillery was immense, and in the Monchy area the shell-fire seldom stopped. When Jerry searched and got the range of a trench he saturated it. Why we survivors weren't driven dotty, I'll never know. Never once did I hear the order, 'Retire', and no one expected to hear it. There were many occasions when I think it would have been wiser to evacuate a trench to prevent unnecessary slaughter, but the unwritten code was, 'There you are, and there you stay', or as Tommy put it, 'We're here, because we're here'. I have often thought that the words of Tennyson, 'Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die', have been indirectly responsible for many a British soldier's death. The words were a godsend to generals and fireside lancers, but they brought small comfort to those who had to do the fighting. The epic charge which inspired Tennyson probably only lasted a few minutes. To apply the same code in the trenches month after month was demanding a hell of a lot, but the Tommies did accept the spirit of Tennyson's words, to their everlasting credit.

By now, the reader has most likely heard enough about the final stages of the Third Battle of Arras as I saw it. From September to early November the company continued in and out

of the Monchy and Wancourt lines, with no promise of a break-through. Fierce artillery and mortar duels blasted the earth with cruel monotony, and the 37th Brigade was hard hit. Jerry got it in the neck even worse from our Stokes mortar gun, which had an amazing speed of delivery. A barrage from a battery of Stokes mortars was a deadly business. With twenty or more bombs in the air at any one time, they literally rained down on the enemy target.

Big British raids were developing too, the purpose being to kill, create panic and snatch prisoners. Many special volunteers, tough and resolute, were used in a single raid. They were exempted from ordinary duties and had good rests between raids. Officered by young and intrepid types, they were trained to perfection in bombing and bayonet work. Their plans were secret, and only when they swarmed into a sector of the line did the local troops know that there was trouble afoot. At first glance, you couldn't tell the difference between officers and other ranks. All wore privates' uniforms, and badges of rank were neatly sewn on just below the back of the tunic collar. Their faces blackened, they tossed back tots of rum, and then, like gladiators, they were ready to strike. Cutters prepared the way where the wire was thinnest, and like ghosts the raiders streaked across No Man's Land in the darkness to pounce on the unsuspecting Jerries. In ten minutes or so it was all over, and they returned with a batch of frightened prisoners, leaving the local troops the burden of enemy retaliation.

I see that I was promoted corporal in October, vice Corporal Bernand, who was sent on a course at the base and had not returned. This made me the senior corporal of the company, with a tidy bit of back pay in the offing. My pay then reached eleven shillings a week.

29 | The Battle of Cambrai

The beginning of November found the division engaged on intense training and manoeuvres in open country around Frévent. The weather was cold and wet, and I contracted influenza, which put me in hospital for eight days. The rest between clean sheets was out of this world, and for a while I was lice-free. When I returned to my unit I received a slight shock by being made orderly sergeant for a week, and I soon learned that something big was working up: in fact, the tank assault on Cambrai. At midnight on 19th November the company left the village of Heudicourt and moved towards the front line near Gonnellieu. The division had become fighting fit again. Large drafts had made up some of the losses from the Arras struggle. Our company was at full strength with 16 guns, but nearly half the complement were newcomers. The CO for the task before us was Major B. R. Delbos, who was, I believe, a Frenchman by birth. I never got to know him very well, but he sent me a kindly letter later on, which I still have. It was common knowledge that the division was about to take part in the most sensational attack in military history. The Third Army was to strike the enemy in the wake of a battering ram of over 400 tanks. I was a corporal in charge of two guns, each with a lance corporal as Number One. The assembly point for the 37th Brigade, commanded by Brigadier General Cator, was approximately 600 yards south-west of Gonnellieu. Nearly 4,000 men were quietly brought together, each of the four battalions being guided to its appointed place. The night was pitch black, and smoking was absolutely prohibited. Officers had instructions to shoot any man caught smoking. There we were, a brigade of men, shivering on a cold November night, without a smoke, and suffering like drug addicts. Talking had to be restrained to the utmost, and then we could only talk in whispers. It was the queerest sensation being packed with a vast crowd of warriors, within 400 yards of our front line, and out in the open, after living like rabbits in burrows for many months. It was a spooky business, and we kept as quiet as mice. I saw or heard nothing

to give away the presence of the brigade. Hot tea and burgoo had been prepared and brought to the assembly in field-kitchens, which was a welcome surprise. Any fears we may have had about being blown to bits in such an exposed position soon faded. Except for a few stray bullets whistling over, nothing disturbed us as we lay on the ground dozing. The nearest enemy trench was about five hundred yards away, at the top of a slight slope. For a distance of eight miles in a northerly direction, many other brigades of British troops (for this was an all-British show) were similarly massing. There were nearly two thousand pieces of artillery lurking in the rear areas of the attacking front. But the *pièce de résistance* was, of course, the tanks, and like all the rest I was excited at the prospect of going into battle behind these new-fangled Wellsian monsters. I felt they were really going to settle, on behalf of all of us, for the countless miseries and privations that we poor blighters had suffered at Jerry's hands. This was to be the reckoning, and the entire Third Army was at the ready, summoned to arms for the great assault.

Zero was at 6.30 am on that memorable day, 20th November. We heard the sound of tank engines warming up. The first glimpse of dawn was beginning to show as we stood waiting for the big bang that would erupt behind us at the end of the count down. Lieutenant Garbutt and Sergeant Critcher were standing near me, and at last the officer began to count. He was bang on, and in a flash the black sky at our backs was ablaze with stabbing shafts of light. A vast drum of terrible thunder swept along the eight-mile front and a chorus of shells screamed over to the east. The need for silence was over, and we exploded in a babble of excitement. That concentration of artillery was surely one of the greatest ever known. The tanks, looking like giant toads, became visible against the skyline as they approached the top of the slope. Some of the leading tanks carried huge bundles of tightly-bound brushwood, which they dropped when a wide trench was encountered, thus providing a firm base to cross over. Suddenly the bombardment ceased, as by that time the tanks were near the German lines and shoot-

ing it out where resistance was met.

The 37th Brigade began to move forward at zero plus one hour in the following order: 7th East Surreys, 6th Buffs, 6th West Kents and 6th Queen's, all in artillery formation. It was a stirring sight when they really got going, and it was pretty marvellous to know that for one precious hour the tanks had borne the brunt of the attack, and not us. We went forward into enemy country in a manner never possible without the aid of tanks. 'A' Section fell in behind the Queen's, my two guns being on the right flank. No enemy fire of any sort impeded us until we passed Gonnellieu on our left, when we came under a little shell fire, but suffered no casualties. It was broad daylight as we crossed No Man's Land and the German front line. I saw very few wounded coming back, and only a handful of prisoners. The tanks appeared to have busted through any resistance. The enemy wire had been dragged about like old curtains, though it was not comparable in density to the terrible wire at the beginning of the Somme battle.

I saw two Jerry machine guns which had been put out of action and the gunners finished off. They must have had the shock of their lives pouring their fire into a tank, only to realise that the bullets were bouncing off as the monster lurched towards them. The battalions began to spread out after reaching the crest of the slope. The Queen's were on the right of the advance, flanked by the St Quentin Canal. As we moved forward the ground sloped slightly down and in the distance, nearly a mile ahead, I could see several tanks rolling forward steadily. There did not appear to be any organised defence against them. Some changed direction to meet odd spots of resistance, mostly from machine guns. One or two had come to a stand-still, probably with engine trouble, as they did not appear to be damaged by enemy action.

From the general situation it seemed to me that the German infantry had either fled at the apparition of the tanks, or had pulled out deliberately, leaving their machine guns to do what they could. On the whole I saw remarkably few Jerries about, dead or alive. The fact that the German High Command had

been given fourteen months' warning of the advent of tanks would surely inspire careful planning to ease the blow when a big tank assault appeared imminent. Is it possible that over four hundred tanks could assemble near our front line, without Jerry knowing anything about it? It's very doubtful.

Whatever the reason for the feeble resistance, it suited my gun-teams very nicely, and we moved forward steadily with guns and gear. Officialdom had designated tanks sex-wise, *i.e.* those with light cannon were males and those with machine guns were females. This caused the lads to think up some bright expressions when viewing the lumbering monsters, such as, 'Here's an old bitch', or, 'There goes a bloody great bull'. The village of la Vacquerie, and Pam Pam and Quennet farms were soon taken with little resistance. Proceeding along a communication trench which ran in the direction of the advance, we reached a point where it cut through the banks of a sunken road. We had to cross the road, but pulled up sharp at the sight of three dead Tommies lying on it. I dashed across the road to where the trench continued—a matter of ten feet—and from a concealed position on my right a Jerry machine gun opened fire. My hair stood on end as the bullets hissed past my back. The gunner was just a trifle too late to get me. There was a tank nearby beginning to move after a stop, and I told one of the crew about the enemy machine gun. 'We'll fix the bastard,' he replied, and slowly the tank shuffled round on its tracks and rolled off in the direction of the hostile gun. Then came a fiery burst as the hapless weapon tried to beat off the tank, the bullets clanging and ricocheting. The teams crossed the road safely, well-bucked at this practical demonstration of a tank in action.

The infantry ahead had deployed; some were combing a wood near la Vacquerie, but general mopping up was yet to come. Hostile machine guns still operated from secret nests undiscovered by the advancing troops. They were an irritating menace, as I was yet to find out. My objective with the two guns under my command was the high ground overlooking the St Quentin Canal where it turned westwards across our front.

We reached it just before dark. The distance covered from the starting point was roughly seven kilometres. Cambrai was six kilometres further on. During our advance we had seen no targets worthy of our guns, but on our left, over the brow of rising ground, considerable small arms fire was going on. We had passed several enemy artillery positions but there were no guns to be seen—additional evidence that Jerry had had an inkling of the attack. Whether it was a different story at other parts of the front I, of course, have no knowledge.

Having selected positions for my two guns, we set about digging emplacements and preparing for any counter-attack that might come in the night. Later on, the two other gun teams of 'A' Section turned up on our left. The night was quiet, and when daylight came I found that I was the senior NCO present, so for a while I had the four guns on my hands. Although I heard nothing concrete, it appeared that some of the officers and sergeants were casualties. There was a German artillery dugout a little behind the ridge where our guns were, and before I investigated it I lobbed a Mills bomb down the steps. I descended and found a dead Jerry at the bottom, but he was cold. There was a large supply of black bread there but we had a nausea about the stuff, and although ravenous, we didn't touch it. I was canny about touching anything in case of booby traps. Some choice souvenir could well tempt me to a sticky end. Since our feed of porridge on the night of the 19th we had been on iron rations, which consisted of a tin of bully beef, hard biscuits, meat extract, and a little tea and sugar.

We used the dugout as our HQ and resting place. We were all fagged out and I don't remember sleeping for two days. The posting of gun sentries had to be maintained and I had to see that it was done. Several times during the day there were odd bursts of machine gun fire, which appeared to come from the rear and made us a bit jumpy. I knew that it might be days before mopping-up operations were properly organised, so we restricted our movements to a minimum. The four gun positions were about 150 yards apart, with clear fields of fire down the slope to the canal, which lay in the valley 350 to 400 yards

distant. On the Jerry side of the canal the ground rose more steeply. It was a clear day, and several Jerries were popping about close to the canal on our side, but there were no targets big enough for using the guns. I made a nuisance of myself with a Mauser rifle tormenting stray Jerries. One dropped and didn't get up. The day passed with nothing of importance happening, there being no further development of the breakthrough. Nightfall came, and a German whizz-bang battery near the village of Masnières began shelling very near our positions, no doubt having spotted us in daylight. The gun flashes seemed very close across the valley and the sound of the firing clapped in our ears. The shelling continued with increasing accuracy, and I became alarmed that one or more of the Vickers guns might get knocked out. The battery was in a vulnerable position on the rising ground just across the canal, and it was well within our range. Never before had I visualised an enemy battery as a target but there it was, about 600 yards away. As a protest and for the good of morale, two of the Vickers guns ripped off a belt each at the battery. The rain of fire had almost instant success, and we had no further trouble that night.

Sometime after midnight an officer came from the 6th West Kents on our left, requesting that the officer in charge of machine guns go with him to his CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Dawson. The duty fell to me, and I accompanied the officer to battalion HQ. And so, for the first time in my brief military career, I found myself being addressed by a senior officer concerning military matters, and not for behaviour calling for disciplinary action. I had seen Colonel Dawson on several occasions at the head of his battalion on route marches, and I knew I was going to see a man whose name was famous as an heroic commander. He had been decorated with the DSO and at least three bars up to that stage of the war. In his questioning he was kind and considerate to me, a youngster with quite a bit of responsibility for a while. He wanted to know the number and disposition of my guns. I left him assured and satisfied that his right flank was guarded effectively by four Vickers guns. As I walked back in the darkness along the ridge over-

looking the canal, I felt a warm satisfaction that a battalion commander acknowledged the autonomy of the Machine Gun Corps, and accepted this without question from one of its very junior personnel. Where the Queen's were I didn't know. I assumed they were somewhere on our right, but no contact was made with them.

30 | Like a scarlet arc

Just after dawn I was very pleased to see Lieutenant Garbutt, who had brought a sergeant with him to relieve me. There was little time in which to learn how the rest of the company had fared. The finger of fate was beginning to point in my direction. It was 22nd November 1917. The night drizzle had ceased and the weather was bright and clear. At 8 am Lieutenant Garbutt, a lance-corporal and myself were walking back to company HQ, discussing features of the local terrain. We stopped to look at a map and for a few moments remained motionless. Some undiscovered Jerry machine gunner, destined to take a hand in my affairs, pressed a trigger and a hail of bullets clove the air. I felt as a bullet passed clean through the thickest part of my left thigh, severing the femoral artery. The Jerry gun continued firing as the three of us lay on the ground, the gunner hoping to polish us off. How can I describe my feelings as I lay, the cone of the bullets scything the grass, knowing that I had already caught a packet? The fact that I was a machine gunner myself increased my fears, and for a few paralysing seconds I felt that death was about to claim me. When the gun stopped my two companions bravely got to work, and when they ripped open the leg of my trousers a spout of blood curved upwards like a scarlet arc, three feet long and as thick as a pencil, then disappeared into the ground. Fate was kind to me. Had I been alone, my chances of survival would have been very slim. To stop the blood I bunged my thumb on the hole it spouted from. I was aware I had broken the rules which said that wounds

should not be touched by hand, but my action stopped the flow like turning off a tap. The lance-corporal rigged up my boot-laces as a tourniquet, and lashed it round my thigh above the wound. I was cold and very hungry. Lieutenant Garbutt was comforting and reassuring, which perked me up a little. It seemed certain that the gun that got me was concealed in a wood 300 yards away. The officer promised that the wood would be combed and I have often wondered if he found it possible to attend to the matter, but I doubt it. He had plenty of worries to contend with a little later on.

A batch of Jerry prisoners came along under escort and the officer arranged for four of them to carry me to the first-aid post near la Vacquerie. I was carried on a duckboard. There were a few packets of cigarettes in my haversack, and I gave the Jerries a packet each to induce them to carry me gently, as I was afraid of more bleeding. I knew enough about wounds to realise that, although I was not smashed up, careless handling might have had serious results.

Before Mr Garbutt bade farewell, he mentioned as if by way of an afterthought that it was a pity I had not been wounded a few hours later, as my promotion to sergeant was to be recorded in company orders that very day. At that particular time I was quite content to be a corporal, provided I got safely away from the battlefield. I have thought this over many times since, especially when I was demobbed. In other words, the matter of a few hours deprived me of a sergeant's pay and gratuity. I have no doubt that the CO acted with the best of intentions, but obviously he wanted a sergeant at once. Army regulations must have tied his hands and Mr Garbutt probably realised this. It was unfair to penalise me, but I suppose many others received the same thankless treatment.

My German bearers plodded on with me. One was considerably shorter than the others, which didn't help matters. Every few minutes they downed me to have a rest, adding to my suspense. The German heavy guns were waking up and several coal-boxes plunged into la Vacquerie. Tanks used in the assault were parked here and there, but there was very little

activity going on around them. Nattering away in their own tongue, which was entirely lost on me, the Jerries had nearly carried me to the first-aid post when four shells came tearing over. They put me down and ran for cover in a nearby shell hole. They were still there when two Tommies came by and carried me the last fifty yards.

Within an hour or so I was in a field hospital under canvas. The surgeons did their job in a large marquee. When I came to, I saw two half-inch rubber tubes extending through the bandages round my thigh. The travelling instructions called for Lysol to be squirted through the tubes every two hours. I was a Blighty case without doubt, and in a few hours I was on board the WESTERN AUSTRALIA again, bound for Southampton.

31 | Still in the wood

On 29th November, a Thursday, I arrived at Birkenhead Borough Hospital. It was not a fancy place, but after the turmoil of war it seemed as near to heaven as I was likely to get. Britain was still celebrating the victory of the Third Army, and the bells of the churches had rung out in praise. At that time the tank thrust was regarded as the first real turn of the tide against German power. Byng's troops were called the 'Byng Boys', a title that caught on like wildfire. As one of them, fresh from the fray, I attracted my little share of attention from the visitors and nursing staff.

The Lysol syringing was continued, and for a while I relaxed in comfort; but there was trouble ahead. At lunch time on Sunday 2nd December, when propped up to deal with the welcome contents on my tray, I became aware of a change of sensation in my thigh. Throwing back the clothes I saw that the bandages were drenched in blood. The wound was leaking fast. I yelled out with fearful wind-up. A young nurse rushed across the ward, took one look at the bloody sight and dashed off. With amazing speed she returned with a young Indian doctor.

He pressed hard on my groin and the bleeding stopped. The nurse lashed a rubber tourniquet above the wound, leaving me pillowless while the operating theatre was being made ready. When I came to my senses the following morning, my mother and grandmother were sitting beside the bed. There was a basket affair over my leg and I thought the leg had been amputated, but I was soon put at ease on that score. Happy though I was to see my folks I had no inclination to talk. A policeman had informed them that I was on the danger list, and had handed them free rail passes from Croydon to Birkenhead. They stayed for two days' but money was scarce and they had to return home.

The Indian doctor had put a ligature above the hole in the artery, but I was not yet out of the wood. At lunch time a week later I was in trouble again. The ligature suddenly failed. I was back where I started, only worse. It was the third severe loss of blood in seventeen days. Doctor Dalziel performed the second operation, and the next morning my mother and an aunt were beside me. Blood transfusion was not a part of the surgeon's technique in those days. If you ran out of the precious fluid you were a candidate for the mortuary. I tell of this harrowing experience merely as a record. I had discovered that getting a 'Blighty one' was not always as it was cracked up to be. With six hot-water-bottles around my leg, I overheard the doctor say to the nurse, 'Keep this boy warm. If gangrene sets in all my work will go for nothing.' The doctor was an elderly man then, and must have passed on long ago, but I gratefully remember him for the skill and patience that has given me, up to this moment, over fifty years of life.

As I lay recuperating I received a letter from Lieutenant Garbutt dated 8th December 1917, which I still have. Here is an extract: 'Well, after you left we had a very hot time indeed. Luckily 'A' Section was in support which was finally the front line, so you see we did some good by holding him up there. The company got 7 guns away out of the 16, and all fought to the last. The officers lost were Messrs Browett, Davey and McErvel. 'C' and 'D' Sections were cut to bits and are about

9 strong each. 'A' lost Streeter (missing) and Wilkinson. Keyes, Ashford, Baynes and Dowler wounded.' The letter ends, 'Buck up, get better and hurry back.'

It was very good of Mr Garbutt to spare the time to write. Although I was as weak as a kitten at the time, his letter made me think that perhaps, later on, if I got stronger, I might have to go back. If I had to have another smack, then let it be serving under Lieutenant Garbutt. His news of the Cambrai *débauche* was a great shock to me. In a few days a classic victory was turned into a wretched defeat, leaving the British people dismayed. I remember one Tommy in my ward saying, 'What price the "Byng Boys" now? And those bloody bells.' Coming after a year of laboured fighting, the initial and historic success in which I had taken part had fizzled out like a damp squib. Seizing his chance, and without tanks, Ludendorff drove the Third Army back on its heels, capturing a good deal more ground than he had lost ten days earlier.

It soon became evident that our success with the tanks had not been backed up by the necessary reserves to consolidate our gains. The fact is there were not enough troops available as reinforcements. It is my personal opinion that many thousands who would otherwise have been available had been sacrificed uselessly against the barbed wire on the Somme. El Alamein would never have been fought if Monty had not been satisfied that he had sufficient reserves.

32 | Recovery and after

On 26th January 1918, my 20th birthday, I lay in bed opening letters from my relatives, and realised how lucky I was to be alive. My uncle, A. E. Coppard, sent me four pounds, a hefty sum then. I had never possessed such wealth before. There was a censored letter from France, signed on the envelope by Lieutenant W. D. Garbutt, and this is what it said:

Dear Coppard,

13/1/1918

Herewith I have great pleasure in enclosing your Soup Ticket. I have also great pleasure in informing you that you have been awarded the Military Medal. Please accept my heartiest congratulations, also Mr Cattell's. Trusting you are progressing favourably and will soon be able to rejoin us.

(Signed) *W. D. Garbutt*

The Soup Ticket was a blue linen card, which said:

Your Commanding Officer and Brigade Commander have informed me that you have distinguished yourself by your conduct in the field.

I have read their report with much pleasure.

(Signed) *A. B. Scott*

Major General,

Commanding 12th Division

I took my first walk along the ward in March, and I remember going to a window and looking out. There was a row of houses across the street and in one of them a children's party was going on. In the glow of the fire I could see the kiddies playing blind-man's-buff, a heart-warming scene. Time passed, and I was able to enjoy some of the treats laid on by the good people of Birkenhead and Liverpool. The theatres reserved two front rows for the boys in blue, and several parties were held in the Cunard Building. Miss Dorothy Ward, the celebrated comedienne, was the star at one of them and she kissed all of us in the front row. The billiard parlour of a large private house in Birkenhead was open to us at any time of the day. The maid would bring in morning coffee or afternoon tea with loads of eats. And so it went on.

At the end of June I was discharged from hospital, and after sick leave I joined the Machine Gun Corps convalescent camp at Alnwick, Northumberland. Spanish flu struck the camp and caused a setback. Half the troops were laid out in isolation

marquees. The only treatment was gargling twice a day. Rumours were current that tens of thousands of people in Spain and other countries had died from that particular brand of flu. It was said that the death roll from it was greater than all the war casualties put together. Lying with others in a cold marquee was not my idea of inducing recovery and the possibility of snuffing it from any kind of flu, after what I had been through, was disquieting, to say the least.

Sir John Maxwell, GOC Northern Command, came to Alnwick to present medals, and I got my Military Medal. There was no bounty given with the medal, but recipients in the 1939-1945 war got ten pounds. Why the distinction between the two wars for the same medal? Were the men who first received the medal less deserving of a bounty than those who gained it twenty odd years later? It would seem that they were.

In time I was posted back to Harrowby Camp, and for a while I developed lofty aspirations about obtaining a commission. I even secured a recommendation from Major H. B. Wilkins, who at one time was second-in-command of the 37th Machine Gun Company. The thing fell through. I was still in medical category 'B'.

It seems I am getting towards the end of my story. The great battle in France was nearing its end. I have always regretted that I was not in at the finish of the fighting. To have celebrated survival with those left of my old company would have been a privilege indeed. Came Armistice Day, and I must record that the NAAFI turned up trumps and served free beer all day long, with no limit.

33 | The pay off

I will not dally any longer. I was demobbed a few days after my 21st birthday, after four and a half years of service. My leg had shrunk a bit and I was given a pension of twenty-five shillings per week for six months. Dropping to nine shillings per week for a year, the pension ceased altogether. At my last medical board in 1920, one of its members, repeating my replies to questions, drawled out, 'Says femoral artery has been severed'.

As a corporal I received about twenty-eight pounds as a gratuity, paid in four separate instalments. A private with similar service got twenty pounds I believe. Demobbed men were allowed to keep their army overcoats, but if they didn't want them they could hand them in at any railway station and receive one pound. Overcoats were not cheap then, and some men kept and wore them for years. The idea of an army overcoat on top of civvy clothes didn't appeal to me, and I traded mine in for the quid. It took all my gratuity to clothe me into something resembling a civilian.

The youth had become a man but with only the capabilities of a youth to meet adult realities in civvy street. Although an expert machine gunner, I was a numbskull so far as any trade or craft was concerned. Lloyd George and company had been full of big talk about making the country fit for heroes to live in, but it was just so much hot air. No practical steps were taken to rehabilitate the broad mass of demobbed men, and I joined the queues for jobs as messengers, window cleaners and scullions. It was a complete let-down for thousands like me, and for some young officers too. It was a common sight in London to see ex-officers with barrel organs, endeavouring to earn a living as beggars. Single men picked up twenty-nine shillings per week unemployment pay as a special concession, but there were no jobs for the 'heroes' who haunted the billiard halls as I did. The government never kept their promise. It is a sad story.

During this time the government, in the flush of victory, were busily engaged in fixing the enormous sums to be voted

as gratuities to the high-ranking officers who had won the war for them. Heading the formidable list were Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig and Admiral Sir David Beatty. For doing the jobs for which they were paid, each received a tax-free golden handshake of £100,000 (a colossal sum then), an earldom and, I believe, an estate to go with it. Many thousands of pounds went to leaders lower down the scale. Sir Julian Byng picked up a trifle of £30,000 and was made a viscount. If any reader should ask, 'What did the demobbed Tommy think about all this?' I can only say, 'Well, what do *you* think?'

As I look back and consider the rehabilitation schemes for demobbed men after the 1939-1945 war, who received a living wage during months of training for new vocations, with the promise of employment to follow, I realise that we Tommies of the 1914-1918 war prepared the way to make life better for those who came after.

In ending this narrative I feel compelled to refer again to the remarkable though brief existence of the Machine Gun Corps. No military pomp attended its birth or decease. It was not a great regiment with glamour and what not, but a great fighting corps, born for war only, and not for parades. From the moment of its formation it was kicking. It is with great sadness that I recall its disbandment in 1922; like old soldiers it simply faded away. There is a fine statue at Hyde Park Corner erected in memory of the Corps, called 'The Boy David', by Derwent Wood R.A. The inscription on it reads:

*Saul hath slain his thousands,
But David his tens of thousands.*

An Old Comrades Association still exists and its members meet annually at the memorial.

Very soon now, the last survivors of the 1914-1918 war will have faded away. Those of us who are still going strong are surely deeply thankful to Providence for having been spared. Just recently I have discovered that an old 12th Division man lives close to me and my heart leaps when I spot him walking

up the road. We never miss a natter, and his eyes shine as we go over the umpteenth episode of our war experiences. We catch vivid memories of the past and are glad that we were young in 1914.

*Today's my daughter's wedding day,
Fifty thousand pounds I'll give away.
Hooray! Hooray!*

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**Printed in England for Her Majesty's Stationery Office by
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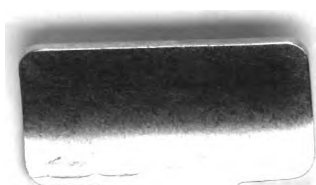
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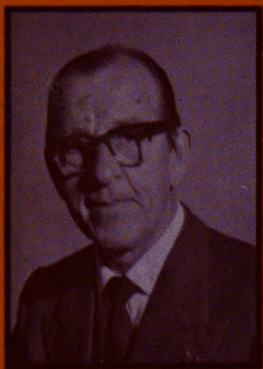
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Inside**





George Coppard was born in 1898 and attended the same board school at Fairlight Place, Brighton, as his uncle, A E Coppard, the short story writer. He left school at the age of thirteen and had various jobs before volunteering for service in 1914. The one that he remembers most vividly was at a taxidermist's, where he had a glimpse of the bizarre art of stuffing orang-outangs, polishing elephants' toe nails and bleaching the skulls of tigers and other wild animals. After his discharge from the army in 1919 he was unemployed for several months. He took a temporary job as an assistant steward in a golf club and then obtained a more permanent post as a warehouse clerk in Greenock, Scotland. In 1925 he became a waterguard officer in the Customs and Excise Department. After nearly twenty-one years' service there he transferred as an Executive Officer to the Ministry of National Insurance, retiring in 1962. He is married, has two daughters and lives in Kent.

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